

Crisis: what it is and is not

Crisis is one example of a concept widely used and misused in the vocabulary of the nursing professional. The technique of concept analysis was used to develop four criteria for the diagnosis of a client as having attributes congruent with the concept of crisis and to differentiate crisis from related concepts, eg, stress and emergency. Variations of a model case were developed to illustrate what crisis is and what it is not. Antecedents, consequents, and empirical referents for crisis are also identified.

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PRECISE NURSING diagnosis, as a basis for professional practice, is not congruent with intuitive use of language arts. Crisis is one example of a concept widely used and misused in the professional vocabulary. Crisis theory is used by many in practice and in teaching. The present author was teaching an honors course in crisis theory and intervention to student nurses and feeling very comfortable with the content and skills that were being inculcated in these neophyte practitioners. Reading Hardy's writings on theory development¹ causes all false securities to vanish.

Hardy warns that, "It is too easy to select a theory which seems plausible or fits our own belief system and then use it in teaching students and working with patients."^{1(p83)} Crisis intervention is a theory that Hardy believes has questionable empirical support: "Even if a crisis intervention conceptual framework makes intuitive sense to a nurse, using it as a basis of

action when it has not been empirically tested is a serious error in judgment."^{1(p85)}

The first step in the development or validation of a theory is to examine the meaning of key terms. Wilson provides a technique through which the meaning of the concept crisis can be examined so that its use and application in nursing is based on principles and criteria. The technique is called "the analysis of concepts."^{2(pvii)} The concept analysis of crisis detailed here is an expanded form of Wilson's technique. The aims of analysis are to develop a set of criteria for the diagnosis of a client as having attributes congruent with the concept crisis and to differentiate crisis from related concepts, eg, stress and emergency.

ASSUMPTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

The following assumptions are widely held and will not be addressed directly in this analysis of the concept crisis.

- Crisis occurs in healthy individuals and is not equated with psychopathology.
- Crises are time limited and acute, not chronic.
- The seriousness of an obstacle or event must be defined by the experiencing individual, not by the magnitude of the event itself.
- A crisis situation contains the potential for psychological growth or deterioration.

The initial step in concept analysis determines the dictionary definitions of the term, which for crisis, did not reveal diverse usage. Rather, two common meanings were uncovered. However, these meanings were referenced to a variety of situa-

tions. The first general meaning involves a crucial situation in which outcome determines whether possible bad consequences will follow.³ The second meaning defines a point in time when it is decided whether any affair or course of action must go on, be modified, or terminate.⁴ None of the settings in which crises are said to occur pervert the two general meanings of the term. For example, in pathology, a crucial situation (the first meaning) is defined as "a sudden change in the course of an acute disease either toward improvement or deterioration,"^{5(p314)} and in literature it is defined as "the point at which hostile elements are most tensely opposed."^{6(p317)}

In finance, a point in time (the second meaning) is defined as "the culminating point of a period of prosperity and rising markets at which the business organism is severely strained and forced liquidation occurs,"^{4(p538)} and in astrology it is defined as "a conjunction of the planets which determines the issue of a disease or critical point in the course of events."^{7(p1178)} The *Concept Dictionary of English*⁸ defines crisis as that which is crucial and essential, thus conveying a meaning of importance, worth, and seriousness.

The adjective "maturational" is a qualifier to the term crisis, indicating situations in which individuals may be unable to picture themselves in a new role, may lack the interpersonal resources needed to cope with the new role, or may not be accepted in a new role by others within the social system.⁹ A crisis resulting from an unexpected or sudden externally imposed stress or trauma is qualified by the adjective situational.

Examination of numerous dictionary definitions of crisis reveals a relatively

equal split between either (1) the event or point in time or (2) the situation and resulting implicit or explicit intrapsychic confusion as key ingredients as the foci. Therefore, the decision was made to incorporate both general meanings into the delineation of the provisional criteria.

PROVISIONAL CRITERIA AND RELATED CONCEPTS

Four provisional criteria were synthesized as common to the various definitions of the term crisis:

1. an impediment to the desired goal;
2. a decisive point requiring action;
3. the inability to act constructively; and
4. a period of psychological instability.

The closest related term in the network surrounding the concept crisis is "emergency." The common definition is "a situation demanding immediate action."^{6(p432)} In an emergency, *action* is needed more than anything else, more than making a decision among various alternatives. For example, "a power failure created an emergency in transportation."^{6(p432)} The scene is a large metropolis with subways, major airports, trains, and traffic-congested intersections. A decision alone will not ease such an emergency situation. Looking at the provisional criteria for crisis and applying them to the concept emergency indicate that in an emergency, an impediment to a desired goal is present and does result in a period of instability.

The decision point in an emergency is less complex, usually involving a decision to act or not act. The course of action to be taken is often quite evident in the nature of the situation. In this example, the action

would be to restore the power. The inability to act is not inherent in the general use of the term emergency.

Stress is another related concept, and Rapoport¹⁰ states that stress and crisis are used interchangeably. She differentiates the two by attributing to stress a purely negative connotation and pathogenic potential, and she defines crisis as having potential for growth, a positive connotation, which serves to raise an individual's level of mental health. A more decisive differentiation between stress and crisis is made by Guzzetta and Forsyth. Referring to Selye's definition of the concept of stress as "the state manifested by a specific syndrome which consists of all the nonspecifically induced changes within a biologic system,"^{11(p29)} the authors conclude that, unlike crisis, stress has no particular cause. Thus, anticipated difficulty in differentiating the terms crisis, emergency, and stress did not materialize (Table 1).

In crisis, there is often a specific cause, loss, or triggering event, which begs for an examination of a variety of harmful or helpful potential solutions to the problem. The effect of a crisis varies greatly among individuals; it is nonspecific. An emergency also has a specific cause, but unlike crisis, it has a very specific, often clear-cut effect. Finally, stress, according to Selye's conception,¹² has nonspecific causes of the

Table 1. Differentiation of cause and effect between related terms

Term	Cause	Effect
Crisis	Specific	Nonspecific
Emergency	Specific	Specific
Stress	Nonspecific	Specific

4 alarm reaction triad with a specific result—the general adaptation syndrome involving adrenal enlargement, thymic-lymphatic atrophy, and gastrointestinal ulcerations.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Because dictionary definitions alone provide insufficient evidence for development of provisional criteria for a concept, a review of a broad and divergent body of literature offers confirmation or lack of confirmation. The popular and professional literature reference the concept crisis to inanimate objects, events, situations, and institutions such as politics, the economy, energy resources, and corporations, as well as to nationalities, countries, and individuals. However, implicit within each of these is human interaction and dependence on outcome. There is no support for the interaction of two or more less than human elements being called a crisis. This is shown by the following examples.

Addressing the "corporate identity crisis," Toffler develops the theme that a stable world economy is a desired goal but that this outcome is thwarted by corporation managers finding themselves in a wholly unfamiliar environment. "Many of our biggest corporations are experiencing something analogous to an identity crisis as they watch the once stable Second Wave framework disintegrate around them."^{13(p229)} Toffler uses the concept crisis in the context of a situation in which a decision is needed to reach a desired human goal, but it is not yet available, and a period of instability exists until constructive action is taken.

According to Tanner and Tanner, the post-Sputnik 1960s was a period when

public school curricula were criticized for lack of relevance, and it was thought that a return to science and mathematics was needed to catch up with Russian technology. This is referred to as the "relevance crisis."^{14(p412)} A period of instability, the need to make a decision to deemphasize social sciences and humanities, and impediments such as lack of federal funding are all demonstrated in the authors' use of the concept crisis.

Use of the concept with characteristics of an adjective rather than its more popular use as a noun is found on the jacket of a novel by Drury. Reviewer Paul Bacon refers to the book's characters as "plunging ahead toward their rendezvous, deep in interplanetary space, with a shattering crisis-ridden destiny—a disaster that threatens not only men's lives, but also the entire future of American leadership in space."^{15(Jacket)} The implication is that one event, a disaster, may contain more than one crisis and that each crisis is decisively individual. The cliché "crisis-ridden destiny" implies a point in time as well as an event.

Illich charges that the physician takes the role of crisis manager in terminally ill cases and "plans self-defeating strategies and commandeers resources which, in their uselessness and futility, seem all the more grotesque. . . . The orientation of any institution towards crises justifies enormous ordinary ineffectiveness."^{16(pp93-94)} The inability to act constructively impedes the victim's comfortable and acceptable death and can be ascribed to both the victim and the physician, with the physician controlling the decision point and the victim experiencing the instability and impediment to the goal. Though all of the provisional criteria are evident, they are dispersed throughout

and between the interacting forces in the crisis.

The urgency for decisive action was illustrated by news reporter Marlene Sanders in a documentary on the nurse shortage crisis (*Nurse, Where Are You?* New York, CBS-TV, May 28, 1981). Sanders described the crisis as an impediment to quality client care. Nurses expressed their fears that the heavy client loads caused by the shortage could result in the death of clients who otherwise may have lived. The inability to act constructively was described in the ineffectiveness of attempts by the nurses to negotiate with hospital administration. Nurses expressed feelings of frustration, exhaustion, lack of job satisfaction, and low morale. Several nurses had already left nursing or were planning to do so soon. A decision whether to strike was being hotly debated among the nursing staff. All the proposed elements of a crisis were present.

Burgess and Baldwin reinforce the provisional criteria being developed. "With continuing vulnerability, the client's coping behaviors turn more to protection of the self rather than to mastery of the situation."^{17(p35)} This interpretation of psychological instability being self-protective is a new element not seen in previous works. The assumption may be made that as dysphoria increases, activity will be increasingly directed inward, making crisis a unidirectional process for the individual. It could be further assumed that outside intervention would be essential to reverse the process and terminate the conflict.

The developer of crisis "theory," Caplan, summarizes the essential factor influencing crisis as "an imbalance between the difficulty and importance of the problem and the resources immediately available to deal

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with it."^{18(p39)} He states that the outcome may not be solely determined by the individual but may also be influenced by choices that occur partly by chance and by other aspects of the situation. The instability and an impediment are criteria for crisis in Caplan's definition.

Aguilera and Messick adopted Caplan's model for nursing practice and define crisis as occurring "when a person faces an obstacle to important life goals that is, for a time, insurmountable through the utilization of customary methods of problem solving."^{19(p5)} Their definition addresses all four of the provisional criteria when the word insurmountable is construed to mean inability to act and the term problem solving is referenced to the need for a decisive point in the process.

The review of the literature is sufficiently supportive of the proposed provisional criteria of (1) an impediment to the desired goal, (2) a decisive point requiring action, (3) the inability to act constructively, and (4) a period of psychological instability; these criteria are therefore offered as the critical attributes of the concept crisis.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

Wilson advocates the development of illustrative cases as a means to gain a "sensitivity that makes all the difference

between a useful and successful analysis and a clumsy attempt to analyze the concept merely by listing its instances without distinguishing between them."^{2(p27)} This researcher has found that variations on one base case is an effective methodology.

Base case

Mary, who has just graduated from college, comes from a long, unbroken line of Preeminent Law School graduates, and everyone, including Mary, fully expects that she will follow family tradition after summer vacation.

This base case will be used not only to differentiate crisis from its related terms but also to test the provisional criteria.

Stress

While in college, Mary became very active in Sierra Club concerns and activities and led a demonstration against President Reagan's exploitation of the environment for industrial purposes. Mary does not understand why she is having increasing difficulty eating and sleeping. Mary expects to go to Preeminent Law School, so no impediment to her self-perceived goal exists. It may be that Mary prefers another type of career related to environmental protection, but this is just an assumption. Any number of conscious or unconscious factors could be the cause of the instability Mary is experiencing. She is unable to act constructively because the cause of her distress is unknown, that is, it is nonspecific.

Emergency

Mary receives a phone call from the Preeminent Law School Admissions Com-

mittee. The caller explains that one place is left in the fall class. Mary is among the finalists for that place, but she must appear for a personal interview that same day at 3 PM. Mary lives 500 miles away. She calls an airline ticket office and says to the clerk: "I've got to get on your flight to Preeminent City. It's an emergency!"

Analysis of the provisional criteria for this situation shows that the decision point is to go to Preeminent Law School for the interview. The distance and time limitations are impediments. It can be argued that a period of hectic instability is occurring as Mary rushes to catch the flight. The inability to act is not present. Action is what is needed more than anything else—action aimed at getting to the interview in time. This constructive action results in Mary's situation being an emergency rather than an example of the concept of crisis.

Crisis

Mary receives a letter of rejection from the Preeminent Law School Admissions Committee. She hides the letter and does not tell anyone about it. In this example, Mary needs to make a decision about her future, which has been drastically altered by the letter. She does not act constructively but, instead, hides the letter, delaying both the decision and the action. Her psychological instability in this instance is implicit rather than explicit and is caused by the rejection placing an impediment to her goal of attending the school. Each of the four provisional criteria are present.

Contrary case

In contrast to the previous model case of crisis, a contrary case has none of the

provisional attributes of the concept crisis. Using the same base from the model case is helpful in clarifying distinctions.

Mary receives a letter of acceptance from the Preeminent Law School Admissions Committee. In this case, none of the critical attributes exist. There is no impediment, no decision to be made, no inability to act constructively, and certainly, no period of psychological instability. This is definitely not an example of a crisis!

Borderline case

A borderline case illustrates a situation that does not completely meet the criteria for a model case of the concept. "By seeing what makes them odd or queer, we come to see why the true cases are not odd or queer, and hence what makes them true cases."^{2(p31)}

Mary receives two letters. One is a rejection from the Preeminent Law School Admissions Committee. The second is a letter of acceptance from the Prestigious Law School. In this case, all of the criteria for crisis may be present. Mary has been rejected by Preeminent Law School, a decision is needed and the period of instability is implied. This case does not give us a clue to whether Mary will act adaptively or maladaptively. It looks like a crisis, but it may not be a crisis because of the acceptance to another and perhaps even more outstanding law school.

ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENTS

There appear to be two antecedents to a crisis situation. First, is a precipitating event which may be of large or small

magnitude. It is the individual's perception of its seriousness that determines crisis and explains why one event may result in a crisis for one person and is scarcely noticed by another. Second, is a threat to homeostasis. The safety and security of the individual are threatened, again, within the context of the person's value system. The threat may be directed toward physical or psychological homeostasis and may originate from within the individual or from external forces or influences.

The consequence of crisis is termination of the immediate conflict, which may originate from a personal decision that is adaptive or maladaptive, with the continuum ranging from growth through death. The termination may also come from outside influences or acts of God, which defuse or negate the crisis. For example, a marital crisis may be negated by the death of one of the partners, but a new crisis may result.

EMPIRICAL REFERENTS

Empirical referents are classes of actual phenomena that, by their existence or presence, demonstrate the presence of the concept and its attributes. The more concrete and precise they are, the better. In some analyses, the critical attributes may become the empirical referents. This is not the case for the concept crisis.

Impediment to the desired goal. The impediment can be isolated and named only after the precipitating antecedent event and the goal of the individual have been identified. The individual, not the therapist, must make this determination. There may be a perfectly obvious route

between point A and point C, but if it is not seen by the person in crisis, the impediment exists.

Decisive point requiring action. The empirical referent is the determination that a choice must be made, or the event will remain unresolved. The referent may promote growth or be detrimental to the situation.

Inability to act constructively. Stalling, avoidance, and actions that are either detrimental or irrelevant to the situation are all potential empirical referents to the inability to act constructively.

Period of psychological instability. Failure to focus on the precipitating event, denial, and the many determinants in mental health literature may be included as empirical referents to the presence of psychological instability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING AND FOR FURTHER STUDY

The entire theory of crisis has not been validated, so the areas for further study and their applications to nursing are extensive. In this analysis, it is difficult to determine whether the precipitating event is an antecedent or a critical attribute of the crisis situation.

The inclusion of the common usages of crisis as defining a point in time and a situation requiring immediate action contribute to the confusion. For the focus of a point in time, the precipitating event is a

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critical attribute. When the focus is shifted to mean the situation itself, the precipitating event takes on the characteristics of an antecedent.

In future research, restriction of the meaning of crisis to one or the other of its general usages would clarify the problem of the accurate placement of the precipitating event. In addition, the empirical referents are imprecise. Before the accurate diagnosis of a crisis situation can be validated, tools are needed to measure both the personal perception of impediments and the mapping of situations, so that a determination can be made of the need for a decision crucial to the termination of conflict.

The identification and definition of concepts are first steps in theory development. The danger of not taking these steps is the perpetuation of false or, at best, untested theory and practice in the classroom and in the client setting. The term crisis should be used but not misused. It must not be confused with situations better diagnosed as stressful or as emergencies. The technique of concept analysis described here is one way to begin.

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