Crisis Intervention

Neil Thompson

TiP Theory into Practice
Series Editor Neil Thompson

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About the Series Editor

Neil Thompson is an internationally known writer, teacher and adviser. He is currently Director of Avenue Consulting Ltd (www.avenueconsulting.co.uk), a company offering training and consultancy to the 'people professions'. He has held full or honorary professorships at four UK universities. He has over 150 publications to his name, including several bestselling textbooks, papers in learned journals and training and open learning materials. He has also produced a number of education and training DVDs (www.avenuemediasolutions.com).

Neil is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; the Royal Society of Arts (elected on the basis of his contribution to organisational learning); and the Higher Education Academy. He was the founding editor of the *British Journal of Occupational Learning* and now edits the US-based international journal, Illness, Crisis & Loss. He is also the editor-in-chief of two online resources:
Well-being Zone (www.well-beingzone.com) and
Social Work Focus (www.socialworkfocus.com).
His personal website is at www.neilthompson.info.

Prospective authors wishing to make a contribution to the *Theory into Practice* series should contact Neil via his company website, www.avenueconsulting.co.uk.

Series Editor's Foreword

About the series

The relationship between theory and practice is one that has puzzled practitioners and theorists alike for some considerable time, and there still remains considerable doubt about how the two interconnect. However, what is clear is that it is dangerous to tackle the complex problems encountered in 'people work' without having at least a basic understanding of what makes people tick, of how the social context plays a part in both the problems we address and the solutions we seek. Working with people and their problems is demanding work. To try to undertake it without being armed with a sound professional knowledge base is a very risky strategy indeed, and potentially a disastrous one.

An approach to practice based mainly on guesswork, untested assumptions, habit and copying others is clearly not one that can be supported. Good practice must be an *informed* practice, with actions based, as far as possible, on reasoning, understanding and evidence. This series is intended to develop just such good practice by providing:

- an introductory overview of a particular area of theory or professional knowledge;
- an exploration of how it relates to practice issues;
- a consideration of how the theory base can help tackle discrimination and oppression; and
- a guide to further learning.

The texts in the series are written by people with extensive knowledge and practical experience in the fields concerned and are intended as an introduction to the wider and more in-depth literature base.

About this book

Crisis intervention is a long-standing and highly respected approach to helping people in difficulties and distress. Historically, it has its roots in mental health, but it can be used in a wide variety of situations and settings and by a wide range of professionals: social workers and other social care workers; probation officers

and youth justice workers; youth and community workers; nurses and other healthcare professionals; counsellors and psychotherapists; police and community support officers; advice workers, mediators and pastoral staff. It can also be of use to managers and leaders at times.

The book is a revised and updated version of *Crisis Intervention Revisited*, first published by Pepar Publications in 1991. It now follows the usual *Theory into Practice* series format and therefore has four parts. The first part explains the theory base behind crisis intervention. This sets the scene for Part Two where the implications for practice are drawn out. In Part Three the emphasis is on tackling discrimination and oppression, while Part Four is a guide to further learning.

The book is intended to show the value of crisis intervention as a helping approach and to provide a foundation for learning more about it so that its benefits for practice can be capitalised upon. It shows that crisis intervention is a helpful, albeit demanding, method of working with people in difficulties and distress – an attempt to capitalise on the positive potential of crisis. This makes it an excellent basis for promoting empowerment.

Neil Thompson, Series Editor

About the author

Neil Thompson is an independent consultant, trainer and author with Avenue Consulting Ltd. His interests include equality and diversity; workplace well-being; loss and grief; and workplace learning. He is a well-published author and his recent books include *People Skills* (3rd edn, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and *Loss, Grief and Trauma in the Workplace* (Baywood, 2009). Neil has a long-standing commitment to the value of crisis intervention as a way of helping people through difficult times.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

It has long been recognised that crises are a very important aspect of working with people in difficulties and distress in general, but just how important, indeed crucial, they can be has not always been fully appreciated.

Crisis intervention is an approach which is premised on the argument that crises are fundamental and highly significant aspects of the situations helping professionals encounter across a variety of settings. Ignoring the nature, basis and implications of crisis can be seen as dangerous, costly and detrimental to good professional practice. It is therefore essential to develop a clear and thorough understanding of crisis-related issues and learn the skills and techniques required to relate such concepts to our practice with people in crisis. The facilitation of just such a process is precisely the aim of this book – a clear and concise introduction to the theory and methods of crisis intervention and the advantages and difficulties associated with adopting such an approach.

The emphasis is strongly on crisis intervention as an applied method. This is neither purely a theoretical treatise nor simply an atheoretical 'commonsense' guide to practice. It is intended as a bridge between theory and practice – a study which takes account of both of these important dimensions and the interaction between the two (see Thompson, 2000a, for a discussion of the complex relationship between theory and practice in general and Thompson, 2010, for discussion of those issues specifically as they relate to social work).

I shall be using the term 'crisis' in a slightly technical sense but the meaning ascribed to it is not very far removed from the everyday 'commonsense' usage of the word. This should become clearer in the pages that follow.

A crisis is a turning point, a situation which pushes our usual coping mechanisms beyond their limits of effectiveness and thus necessitates a different response, a different strategy for coping. Everstine and Everstine (2006) capture this point well when they argue that:

> A person in crisis encounters a situation or series of situations that cause the person to alter his or her patterns of living. The circumstances that lead to each person's crisis moment are unique to the person, but the experience of being-in-crisis is universal – from the cabinet minister to the cabinet maker. The key element in everyone's crisis is disruption in the normal conduct of one's affairs, of change being required of the person by forces beyond control, by the feeling that 'things might never be the same'. (pp. 3-4).

The term 'crisis' is often used in everyday speech to denote a highly stressful set of circumstances or an emergency. However, this rather loose usage of the term is unhelpful, for we need to be precise about what we mean by 'crisis'. The amount of stress, quantitatively speaking, is not necessarily an indicator of crisis. For example, a student may feel considerable pressure or even stress when facing exams, but may none the less cope quite effectively without having to take drastic steps. In other words they may take it in their stride and thus, despite the high level of pressure, a crisis does not arise. For others, however, who may not be so well equipped to handle such pressure, a crisis may be provoked by an even lower level of demand upon them. 'Crisis' is therefore a qualitative concept, rather than simply a quantitative one.

The issues relating to coping abilities, how and why they break down and the consequences of such breakdown will be consistent themes throughout this text. They are key aspects of crisis intervention, for it is in relation to these factors that intervention by a skilled helper can be so fruitful, as indeed we shall see below. Crisis is the 'critical' moment, the time when significant changes can be made as a result of the energy and motivation the situation produces. These changes can prove to be constructive or destructive, helpful or detrimental, and so crisis point is very much a turning point, simultaneously a threat and an opportunity for growth. It is a challenge. It has challenged and defeated the coping mechanisms within our usual repertoire and is now challenging our ability to develop new and effective methods of handling the situation. One of the key roles for the professional helper in crisis intervention is therefore an educative one, to teach people in crisis new and effective responses, to guide them towards the positive and constructive use of crisis.

Very often the response of those close to a person in crisis is to look for a shortcut through the crisis or simply to sit it out. This is often mistakenly referred to as crisis intervention, but this type of 'patching up' of a crisis would be more accurately termed 'crisis survival', as the aim is to minimise damage, rather than maximise the potential for growth and development and progress in dealing with the problems and challenges being faced.

Crisis intervention does not therefore simply mean intervening in crises in a general sense; it is a specific approach to crisis based on a set of theoretical principles, a conceptual framework to guide and inform practice. Crisis intervention is not just one among many 'tools of intervention'. Rather, it provides a framework of understanding that can be used to enhance the use of other methods. This book should not therefore be seen as a study of crisis as a general phenomenon, but rather an introduction to the specific concepts and techniques that are of value to those workers in the helping professions who are called upon to deal with crises.

Chapter 1 presents a brief and schematic account of traditional crisis theory and its key tenets. It also attempts, albeit in outline only, to indicate some weak points of the traditional thinking on the subject and to point to a more sophisticated and updated theoretical basis. This sets the scene for Part Three of the book.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the positive use of crisis, the potential for learning and growth inherent in the challenge of crisis. The chapter begins with an analysis of the physiological concomitants of crisis and from this moves on to examine the usefulness of assertiveness. The chapter also discusses the relationship between crisis theory and other approaches to helping (theories, tools, methods). It provides illustrations of how crisis intervention can be used alongside other theory-based methods. The point emphasised is that crisis intervention is not an exclusive approach; it can be used in tandem with a wide range of other helping methods.

To open Part Two Chapter 3 emphasises the need for timely, clear and accurate assessment and explores some of the skills required and how they can be developed.

Chapter 4 tackles the issues of integrating theory and practice – the 'nuts and bolts' of using crisis theory in practice, as it were. This chapter attempts to paint a picture of what a crisis intervention approach in action actually looks like.

Chapter 5 provides illustrations of the themes and issues so far raised. Three case studies based on actual examples of crisis intervention practice are presented. Links are drawn between the practice situations and the theoretical issues which underpin them.

Chapter 6 explores some of the significant demands that crisis work makes of professional helpers. This chapter is intended to provide a helpful backdrop to the realities of practice. It raises questions about the support networks needed and the organisational implications for workers who seek to adopt a crisis intervention approach.

Chapter 7 is the first of two chapters in Part Three concerned with promoting equality and valuing diversity. Its focus is on crisis intervention in the context of anti-discriminatory practice. Chapter 8 completes Part Three and is concerned with how crisis intervention can be seen as part of a commitment to empowerment.

Following the Guide to Further Learning that forms Part Four is the conclusion. This restates the main themes and draws the discussion to a close, making the point that the art of the crisis worker involves helping to guide people from the pain, grief and hurt of a crisis situation, through compassion and onwards to growth, opportunity and empowerment.

The message I seek to convey in this book is that crisis intervention is a very useful and effective theory-based approach to helping people to deal positively with a wide range of potentially destructive crisis situations. In some respects it is a very demanding approach, but the case I wish to argue here, on the basis of many years' experience of using these methods, is that the benefits of this approach far outweigh the costs in terms of time, energy and emotional commitment. It is to be hoped that the following chapters will succeed in clarifying and justifying this faith in crisis intervention.