

What Is Crisis Intervention?

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Crisis Intervention

Crisis intervention is a short-term (usually single session) technique used to address an immediate mental health emergency, stabilize the individual in crisis, and create and implement a safe, appropriate plan for next steps and future treatment.

Although crisis intervention can be used in therapy if a client presents in an emergency, crisis hotlines also offer this service using appropriately trained volunteers or employees.

What Causes a Crisis?

A mental health crisis can occur for many different reasons. By definition, we often do not know when a crisis may occur, and we might not be able to wait for a regularly-scheduled therapy appointment or standard business hours to address it.

Stressful and Traumatic Events May Lead to Crisis

When a person experiences a highly-stressful or traumatic event, they can go into crisis afterward because they cannot process what happened independently. Crisis intervention can help determine what they need to do to ensure their immediate safety, de-escalate their feelings, and make a plan for appropriate resources and ongoing treatment.

If someone experienced a traumatic event a long time ago, they can still go into crisis if they are triggered in the present moment. Crisis intervention can help them return to the present moment, process the trigger, and manage their symptoms until they can connect with their treatment team.

People with various mental health diagnoses, including mood disorders, psychotic disorders, or substance use disorders might experience a sudden, acute increase in their symptoms. They can benefit from crisis intervention to ensure immediate safety, utilize appropriate coping skills, and connect with ongoing treatment options.

Someone who experiences suicidal ideation can experience a crisis if they feel that they might act on these thoughts. Crisis intervention addresses any specific triggers for these thoughts and manages the individual's safety.

How Crisis Intervention Works

Effective crisis intervention involves connecting to the person in crisis and talking them through specific steps to ensure their immediate safety as well as make appropriate plans for future care.

Many crisis resources utilize a six-step model developed by Dr. Richard James. This model includes the following six steps:

1. **Define The Problem.** In this stage, the responder establishes a connection with the person in crisis and helps them articulate their crisis as well as what caused it, using active listening and empathy.
2. **Ensure Client Safety.** This includes making sure that the client is in a safe place and is not at risk for immediate harm, both self-inflicted and abuse by another person.
3. **Provide Support.** Once the client is physically safe and the responder understands the nature of the problem, the responder helps determine appropriate options for both immediate and long-term support.
4. **Examine Alternatives.** The responder encourages the client to explore options for people who care for and want to help them, coping skills they can use in the moment, and appropriate re-frames or new ways of looking at the problem.
5. **Make Plans.** In this stage, the client and responder develop specific plans for how to implement the chosen alternatives, focusing on realistic and manageable steps that the client can take.

- 6. Obtain Commitment.** Finally, the responder helps the client commit to these steps. This includes putting the plan in writing so that the client knows what they need to do and can remember what helped them during the crisis.

These steps help the client work through the emergency both in the moment and by taking steps to get further support in place in the future. Getting ongoing support in place can prevent future crises.

Impact of Crisis Intervention

Outpatient crisis intervention services can give clients the option to work through an immediate crisis in a safe environment without requiring hospitalization. It can assess risk level and connect clients to services that can help them in the moment. Typically, crisis intervention services are free to use and therefore accessible to anyone regardless of income or financial means.

Phone and text-based crisis hotlines allow clients to access services from anywhere because they do not have to travel to a specific location to access support. Research has shown consistent outcomes for both phone and text-based hotlines.

When clients have access to crisis resources that they can use at any time, they can sometimes avoid a higher level of care or hospitalization for mental health needs. Crisis support can provide a safety net for the client in between their other treatments.

Potential Risks of Crisis Intervention

Let's take a look at some potential risks of crisis intervention.

Crisis Intervention Is Not a Substitute for Therapy

Crisis intervention only addresses the immediate emergency and is not a substitute for therapy services. While most crisis hotlines are free to use, it can be difficult for people in rural areas or those with low income to access and afford ongoing treatment and support.

If a client's only accessible option is crisis support, they are unlikely to see improvement in their symptoms.

Crisis intervention is a tool, but no one tool can fix everything. People need access to a variety of resources in order to get the support that they need.

Crisis Responders May Not Know How to Deal With Every Situation

Not all crisis resources are created equal. Responders do not need an advanced degree or licensure in order to provide crisis intervention. This makes crisis intervention accessible, as responders can be trained quickly. However, responders might not feel equipped to manage a client's needs or have the knowledge to make appropriate referrals.

This occurs most frequently with suicidal clients and can lead to the client not getting appropriate follow-up care.

There Is No Prior Therapeutic Rapport

Although crisis intervention can effectively help a client through a difficult time, clients are connected with whichever respondent is available rather than a provider that they know well. This can create an added challenge for clients who have difficulty trusting new providers.

Help Is Limited If a Client Remains Anonymous

Finally, some crisis hotlines allow users to be anonymous. While this can help clients feel more comfortable sharing, this means that the responder cannot verify their location or put them in touch with emergency services if the need arises.

A Word From Verywell

Several qualified crisis resources exist if you are experiencing a mental health crisis. If you are experiencing suicidal ideation, substance dependence, abuse, domestic violence, or another crisis, help is available. Asking for help can be difficult, especially if you are in crisis, but support is available.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **988** for support and assistance from a trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911.

For more mental health resources, see our National Helpline Database.

5 Sources

Verywell Mind uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our editorial process to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

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