



Helping Families in Crisis

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Identify the purposes and characteristics of family functioning.
2. Define crisis and how it can affect family functioning.
3. Differentiate between situational and maturational crises.
4. Discuss actions of the home health aide that can assist families in crisis.

An 18-year old athlete is transferred to a rehabilitation facility with paralysis due to a severe spinal cord injury. A 26-year old woman with cerebral palsy develops pneumonia and is likely to die. An elderly man discovers that Medicare and insurance will pay only a small percentage of his wife's home care bills, and wonders how he will be able to cover the rest and still keep their home. A family is grief-stricken over the impending death of their beloved mother and grandmother.

There are many circumstances, occurring every day in facilities and homes throughout the nation, when families find themselves in a state of crisis. As a home health aide, you may find yourself involved in these situations as you provide care for the affected client, or when family members ask you questions. Your understanding, empathy, and communication skills are crucial at this time.



This newsletter will discuss the impact of crisis on family members. The importance of the family as a social structure, and characteristics of effective families will be covered, including how these are affected by crisis. The role of the home health aide in working with families in crisis will also be addressed.

The Family

The family is considered our most basic and important unit in society. By definition, a family is a group of two or more people bound together by

common heritage, households, goals, and/or commitment. A family can consist of an almost limitless arrangement of relationships, such as one or more parents with children, couples without children, extended families with multiple generations living together, and people who are not related or married, but who consider each other family.

Families form a social structure through which the physical, emotional, developmental, financial, and educational needs of the members can be met. A family's values, beliefs and culture form the basis for its functioning, and are passed on from older to younger members.

Families vary in level of well-being, from highly functional to highly dysfunctional. Characteristics of effective families include clear communication, nurturing, spending time with members, commitment, and clear yet flexible roles of the family members. When a crisis occurs, the effectiveness of the family functioning and coping skills of the members play a large role in how the family handles a crisis—whether it becomes stronger and more cohesive, or weakens and falls apart.

Crisis and Stress

A crisis is a change, a turning point in life, when current coping skills are no longer effective in dealing with the situation. To adequately cope with the crisis, new coping skills and ways of adapting must be learned.



Lack of effective coping may result in physical illness, deterioration of relationships with others, or substance abuse. Disorders such as anxiety or depression may also occur.



Crises cause stress in the affected person. Stress is a physical and psychological event that causes changes in physical body functions, such as heart rate, as well as changes in the person's emotions and thought processes. Stress is very individual—a situation that is very upsetting to one person may not be perceived as stressful by someone else. It's very much like pain—only the person experiencing it knows its severity and impact, which cannot be judged by the situation. When one family member experiences a crisis and stress, all family members are affected.

Crises that occur suddenly and unexpectedly, like loss of a job, illness, or death, are termed situational crises. But crises also occur at predictable points in everyone's life—these are called maturational crises. Events such as weaning from the bottle or breast, starting school, college graduation, marriage, childbirth, "empty nest" syndrome, and moving to a long-term care facility are all examples of maturational crises throughout the lifespan. Even a seemingly "normal" and happy event, such as giving birth to a healthy baby, can place the family into a crisis state. The new parents find themselves in an unfamiliar situation, and may experience stress and a state of crisis for weeks, or even months, until they adapt, develop new coping skills, and regain normal family functioning.

Helping Family Members in Crisis

There is much you can do to assist family members in crisis. Your help can focus on obtaining assistance for the family members, and also providing support.

- *Obtaining assistance:* Family members may come to the home health aide as a point of contact when needs or questions arise. Therefore, you may become aware of family needs before the nurse or other healthcare providers. When this occurs, notify the nurse promptly of the family's needs, so that assistance can be arranged. For example, a husband may question you repeatedly about when his wife will be discharged from home care, even though no immediate plans have been made. He then says, "We just can't afford it much longer." Or, you may notice that a family is very upset and is having a difficult time coping with their loved one's decline in health. When assisting family members, make sure that you provide information about the client only to

authorized family members, those that the client has indicated may receive information about his/her healthcare status.

- *Providing support:* When family members are stressed and upset, they are looking for empathy and assistance during interactions with staff members. These interactions with the staff can either help family members to remain calm, or can escalate their stress and increase negative behavior. Be aware of how important your attention and tone of voice are to the upset family members. For example, when the home health aide enters the home to give Mr. Jones, a hospice client, his bath, Mrs. Jones says loudly, "I need to talk to my husband's nurse now!" She is sobbing and appears very upset. If the home health aide does not appear concerned or fails to take prompt action on the request, Mrs. Jones is likely to feel even more upset that her needs are not being attended to. If however, the home health aide looks concerned and says kindly, "Of course, I'll call the nurse now", Mrs. Jones' agitation may decrease somewhat. The words and actions of the home health aide can produce very different responses in the family member. Acknowledging the person's upset state and offering assistance are often helpful, as well, such as, "I can see that you're upset, Mrs. Jones—I'll call the nurse right now. Is there anything else I can do for you?" Comfort measures are often appreciated by family members during difficult times. You may offer them a glass of water or tissues, or walk them to a chair or couch to sit down.



Avoid labeling family members as "difficult" or "demanding." Severe stress, such as experienced when one is fearful or anxious about the well-being of a loved one, can cause people to behave in ways they never have before. And, remember not to judge the family's behavior based on the severity of their situation. Everyone perceives stress individually, and what seems like a minor situation to you can be very stressful for them. Also, when assisting distraught family members, make sure that you continue to observe appropriate boundaries. Don't let yourself become involved in the situation to the point that unprofessional behavior occurs, such as returning to the home after work to visit with the family or giving them money or other needed items.



Crisis situations occur frequently in healthcare, causing much stress and difficulty for family members. Your kindness, concern, and assistance can help family members to cope more effectively.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____ UNIT: _____

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- ____ 1. The family structure serves to meet which of the following needs of family members?
- A. financial
 - B. developmental
 - C. emotional
 - D. all of the above
- ____ 2. A crisis affecting the family always results in weaker family functioning.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 3. Which of the following most clearly indicates a crisis?
- A. a situation occurs that the person has not experienced before
 - B. emotional upset, such as crying
 - C. a 68-year old man suffers a stroke
 - D. current coping skills are not adequate
- ____ 4. The best indicator of whether or not stress is occurring is the severity of the situation—the more serious the situation, the higher is the family member's stress level.
- A. True
 - B. False

- ____ 5. Stress causes changes in the affected person's:
- A. emotions
 - B. physical body functions
 - C. thoughts
 - D. all of the above
- ____ 6. Which of the following is an example of a maturational crisis?
- A. a family decides to file for bankruptcy
 - B. an elderly woman breaks her hip
 - C. the youngest child goes off to college
 - D. a 36-year old father of two is killed in a motor vehicle accident
- ____ 7. When one family member experiences a crisis and resulting stress, all family members are affected.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 8. A crisis may be caused by a normal and even joyful event, such as starting school or having a baby.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 9. When assisting upset family members, the home health aide can provide information about the client to anyone who is related to the client.
- A. True
 - B. False
- ____ 10. The home health aide learns that family members of a client are having severe financial difficulty and are stressed about healthcare costs for their loved one. The home health aide should:
- A. do nothing, since this does not involve the home health aide's role
 - B. tell the family about some community aid organizations
 - C. notify the nurse promptly
 - D. call the billing office to see if their costs can be reduced

