

**Student
Guide To Coping
With Emotional Crisis**

by

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Student Guide To Coping With Emotional Crisis

This guide was specifically designed to help you, as a University of Alberta student, cope with an emotional crisis which may occur as part of your university experience or as a part of the unpredictability of life. A crisis may be precipitated by any number of potential unforeseen events including a death in the family, a violent crime, an accident, a sexual assault, sexual abuse, a natural disaster, a suicide, or violence on campus, just to mention a few. Other less obvious situations may also be perceived as a crisis, depending on how they are interpreted by each person. Some examples here include the ending of an intimate relationship, receiving a very poor grade, losing a friendship, being asked to withdraw from university, parents divorcing, or the loss of a job.

Many circumstances and events can precipitate a crisis and it is one's reaction, rather than the event itself, that defines it as a crisis. A crisis is created by an event which temporarily overwhelms our coping resources. During a crisis people tend to react in a number of ways. Some of the more typical responses to crisis include:

Emotional Responses:

- Shock, denial or disbelief
- Depression
- Fear (for yourself or others)
- Anxiety and worry
- Anger or irritability
- Hopelessness or helplessness
- Guilt and shame
- Loss of motivation
- Grief
- Numbness

Cognitive Responses:

- Difficulties concentrating
- Memory problems
- Problems making decisions
- Confusion
- Self-doubt
- Intrusive thoughts
- Nightmares about the precipitating event
- Flashbacks about the event

Physical Responses:

- Stomach problems (i.e. nausea)
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Rapid heart beat
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Sweating or chills
- Exaggerated startle response
- Chest pain

Behavioral Responses:

- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Sleep disturbance
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Aggressive or disruptive behavior
- Rapid weight gain or loss
- Deterioration of personal hygiene or dress
- Inability to relax
- Reduced sexual interest
- Emotional outbursts (i.e., crying, giggling)

You do not need to have all of these indicators to be considered in crisis, but some of these from each category are anticipated. Being able to identify yourself as being in crisis is important so that you can make a good decision on how to best manage your response. Some people may be able to manage a crisis with the support of friends and family, others may feel very overwhelmed and in need of additional assistance. The options you need to consider will depend on how severe you perceive your crisis to be. This guide will hopefully help you make some good choices in dealing with your immediate crisis and help you avoid more pain and suffering for yourself and others.

This guide is not designed to address every potential crisis that may arise in your life, but instead, is focused on helping you more generally cope with emotional crises. Specifically, it has three sections: general strategies to deal with crisis, resources to help you manage suicidal thoughts and intent, and resources to best manage other emotional crises.

General Strategies To Deal With Crisis

These are all strategies that you can try on your own, either before you seek outside support and resources or in conjunction with this assistance. Since a crisis, by definition, occurs when an event happens which overwhelms our coping resources, improving your coping strategies is crucial to better managing the crisis. Try one or several of the following strategies:

Talk To Someone About The Crisis

Talking to a family member, friend, relative, loved one, minister, instructor, or counsellor is probably the most effective way of dealing better with a crisis. Research indicates that repeatedly talking about the situation which created the crisis can help people develop a new perspective on the event or events that triggered the crisis. As well, being with people you are most familiar with can be very comforting.

Remind Yourself That Your Response Is Normal And Temporary

Remember that the emotional, cognitive, physical and behavioral responses outlined earlier in this booklet are all normal and to be expected when we are in crisis. Also, remember that these responses are time limited, especially if we utilize strategies and resources to deal with the crisis. However, the exact time frame for complete resolution of these symptoms is hard to determine and depends on a variety of factors.

Return To Everyday Routines And Habits

Re-establishing your old patterns and routines can have a very comforting effect after a crisis. As we return to the more predictable, it allows our nervous system to calm down and begin to return to normal. Since change is innately stressful, predictability after a crisis reduces stress.

Write Out Your Thoughts And Feelings

A journal of your thoughts and feelings can help significantly in your recovery, particularly if you do not have a lot of people to talk to. Using a

journal will help you see the crisis more clearly and track changes in your thoughts, feelings and beliefs over time.

Allow Yourself An Emotional Release

Releasing your tension and pent up emotions during a crisis can be a powerful part of the process of recovery. Holding on to emotions does not allow us to move on and feel in control again. Crying can be one form of emotional release that can be very helpful.

Practice Self-Care Activities

Self-care usually refers to time spent ensuring that your basic needs are met in terms of adequate sleep, a healthy diet, regular exercise and fun or enjoyable activities. If your basic needs are not being met you will find it much more difficult to deal with a crisis.

Delay Any Major Decisions

If at all possible, always delay making major decisions until the crisis is over. During a crisis our ability to think logically can be severely compromised and therefore, there is a much higher chance we will make a poor decision.

Avoid The Use Of Alcohol Or Drugs

Alcohol and drugs will only further compromise your ability to make good choices and may increase your level of emotionality, putting you at greater risk for such things as self-harm or suicide. Since alcohol is a depressant of the central nervous system, it can also adversely affect your mood.

Give Yourself Time To Heal

Realize that this is likely going to be a difficult time for you and be patient with the many changes in your emotions that you are experiencing. Give yourself time to mourn the losses you may have experienced through the crisis. This may also mean temporarily taking on a lighter course load.

Exert Control Where You Can

In order to control those aspects of the crisis that you can, you need to be able to identify those elements that you have no control of. Putting energy into these aspects that you cannot control will be very frustrating and futile, especially at a time when your energy may be limited. Remember, you often cannot control the event that created the crisis, only your own response to the event.

Try To Compartmentalize The Crisis

This means not letting the crisis affect all areas of your life. This could involve mentally blocking out thoughts related to the crisis or only talking about the crisis when you have the time to effectively deal with it.

Set Goals For Yourself

Establishing goals for yourself that create a structure for returning to normal can help give you a sense of direction and hope for the future. Ensure you have some flexibility with these goals however, and try not to get down on yourself if you are behind on achieving them. It is better to focus on one thing that you can do today rather than on many tasks that seem unachievable.

Distract Yourself From Your Unhelpful Feelings And Thoughts

Distraction can take a wide variety of forms and can be literally anything that alters the focus of your attention. Involving yourself in activities like cooking, fishing, cycling, volunteering or other hobbies is just one example. We can also distract ourselves with alternate emotions by doing such activities as going to very emotional movies, listening to music that produces emotions and reading books that elicit an emotional response. Distraction can occur with alternate sensations as well, by doing such things as holding ice in your hand, taking a hot shower, or listening to loud music.

Utilize Self-Soothing Techniques

Self-soothing techniques refer to activities that comfort you and focus on each of your five senses: vision, hearing, smell, taste and touch. This might

mean, for example, having a special treat and savoring each and every bite or sitting by a waterfall and mindfully listening to every sound generated by the water. This could also mean enjoying the feel of a warm bubble bath or being completely mindful of the beautiful scenery around you or some beautiful art.

Create A Safe Place To Retreat

Your safe place could be a room in your home that you have transformed in some way to make it feel very comfortable and safe. To make it more comfortable, fill it with comforting objects like soft blankets or pictures that are calming. If you like, play peaceful or soothing music and adjust the lighting to make it warm and peaceful. Use your imagination to make it special for you. This can be a place you can retreat to either during the crisis or after the crisis is over.

Learn And Practice Deep Breathing

Deep breathing can be a very powerful way to better manage your stress level during a crisis. It seems so simple, yet few people use deep breathing in a conscious way to manage a crisis. Remember, when you are breathing correctly, your stomach rises as you inhale at the end of each breath. It also may help to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Practice this skill periodically each day to get good at utilizing it.

Use Imagery To Alter Your Feelings

When we are unable to directly change the events related to a crisis, we can change our feelings, on a temporary basis, through the use of imagery. This imagery can take a variety of forms, from recalling a peaceful and pleasant scene from your past to imagining yourself coping well with the crisis and feeling in control of your life.

Set Healthy Boundaries In Your Relationships

During or after a crisis, you may have discovered that your boundaries or limits have been violated in some way. In all of our relationships, we have the right to establish boundaries that feel safe and comfortable. This means

learning to say no to anything you do not want. This gives us a much better sense of control during or after a crisis.

Focus On Activities That Build Your Self-Esteem

During a crisis, the events may impact significantly on our self-esteem and recovery may involve activities that are designed to rebuild self-esteem. This could include such things as keeping a record of your accomplishments, developing a list of your strengths or positive qualities, getting feedback from people who know and appreciate you, or filling your life with positive and supportive people. These are just a few examples, and there are many ways to rebuild self-esteem.

Develop A Positive Focus

During a crisis it is easy to develop a very negative perspective due to the increased stress placed upon you. You can, however, train yourself to develop a much more positive focus. A daily inventory of what went right can be one helpful strategy to develop this more positive filter.

Develop More Healthy Self-Talk

Our internal dialogue has a big impact on how we will cope with any form of crisis. You need to look at the evidence for the accuracy of your self-talk during a crisis and change those aspects that are based on fear or anxiety, rather than fact. Learn to replace it with more rational self-statements, and/or practice daily positive affirmations.

Develop Or Rely On Your Spirituality

During a crisis, many people find great support and comfort in a more spiritual perspective, whether this is an organized religion or not. Spiritual beliefs can provide strength and meaning when suffering is unavoidable.

Use Humor

Laughter is considered one of the best medicines for stress, and humor can be used to better manage a crisis. Actively seek out humorous books, T.V.

shows, movies, or life situations that will bring humor into your day. Be creative to get your daily fix of laughter.

Find Out About The Resources Available To You

There are many potential resources available to you in a crisis and seeking this type of information can help you overcome feelings of hopelessness and loss of control. These resources, in turn, can significantly help you better manage the crisis.

Resources To Deal With Suicidal Thoughts And/Or Intent

Repeated suicidal thoughts or plans to commit suicide need to be taken very seriously, by yourself and by others. If you are thinking about suicide right now you need to try and make a rational choice about your options at a time when rational thinking can be very difficult. Your emotions are probably telling you that you just want to end the emotional pain that has felt overwhelming. Remember, however, that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. All feelings will change in time if we just make some good choices. So what are your options?

Emergency

If you are in immediate danger of committing suicide, go to the Emergency Department at the University of Alberta Hospital or any other emergency ward. You may have to wait a little while, but this is the only way that you can guarantee your safety. The emergency ward physician will ask you a number of questions and help you develop a plan to both deal with your suicidal thoughts and feelings, and the circumstances that have led to these. Be honest about your level of risk, or you will not get the help you need. If this is difficult to do alone, ask a friend or family member to go with you. You then need to follow-up on the suggestions made to you.

The Mobile Mental Health Crisis Intervention Service

If you are experiencing depression with suicidal thoughts and intention, you can access the Mobile Mental Health Crisis Intervention Service. The Mobile Crisis Team will respond either by phone or come to you, depending on the situation. You, your family or friends can phone 482-0222 to access their services. The services they provide include assessment of the situation, treatment planning, referral to community agencies, hospital admission, if necessary, and In-Home Support, if needed.

The 24-Hour Distress Line

If you are feeling suicidal and need someone to talk to, the Distress Line at 482-HELP (4357) is available 24 hours per day, 7 days a week. Trained staff will offer you support and referrals when no one else is available or if

this feels like your most comfortable option. Sometimes, just talking to someone else can give you a new perspective on your situation, or point you in the right direction to get the support you need to get through a really tough period in your life.

The University Health Centre (UHC)

If you are having suicidal thoughts, but are not in immediate danger of committing suicide, it would be very helpful to see a physician. All the physicians at the University Health Centre (2-200 SUB) are able to prescribe a variety of medications (i.e. anti-depressants), which may be very helpful in terms of dealing with your depressive feelings (i.e., sadness, hopelessness, loneliness) or other depressive symptoms (i.e., sleep disturbance, change in appetite, difficulty concentrating, memory problems, decreased sexual interest, social withdrawal, fatigue, excessive worry, self-criticism, and lack of interest in everyday life activities). Anti-depressants today are commonly used and are very safe when monitored by a physician. A high percentage of people respond well and you have a high probability of feeling better in a relatively short period of time. Medication, combined with counselling, is considered to have the best success in helping people deal with their depressive feelings and suicidal thoughts.

In some cases, the physicians may also refer students seen at the UHC to psychiatrists, who have the most specialized knowledge in how to deal with severe suicidal thoughts. Psychiatrists are most familiar with the medications used to treat emotional concerns and in some cases, may utilize counselling as well as medication to facilitate positive change.

UHC - Student Counselling Services

If you are having some serious thoughts about suicide, but are not in immediate danger, go to UHC – Student Counselling Services (2-600 SUB) or phone at 492-5205. You will either be seen immediately or an individual counselling session will be arranged for you. The psychologist/counsellor you see will then spend some time with you to help you and him/her understand what is contributing to your depression and suicidal thoughts. For anyone who is depressed, there are almost always issues that have led to your sense of hopelessness or your desire to escape your emotional pain.

Once these issues are identified, a plan can be developed to overcome or deal in a new way with these concerns. Counselling has great potential to help you to develop other coping strategies to deal more effectively with your life, thus eliminating the need to see suicide as your only option. Psychologists/counsellors are the best trained professionals to help you deal with your personal problems and UHC – Student Counselling Services are utilized by a couple of thousand students on campus every year. **Remember, it is a smart person who knows when to ask for help. Not a sign of weakness.**

The Faculty Of Education Clinical Services

Since UHC – Student Counselling Services can get very busy during the semester, due to the large number of students that access it, you can also receive counselling on campus through the Faculty of Education Clinical Services. The service is staffed by counsellors and psychologists in training who are working on their Masters and Ph.D. degrees in Counselling Psychology and supervised by registered psychologists. There is, however, a nominal registration fee each academic year (September to May) for the service. Phone 492-3746 or drop by 1-135 Education North Building to book an appointment.

The Psychiatric Treatment Clinic (U of A Hospital)

You are asked to call for information prior to arriving at the clinic by phoning 407-6501. You will then be scheduled for an assessment at either 8:30 a.m. or 12:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, assuming there is availability. This assessment can take up to four hours and will be the basis of determining the services that could help you. The Psychiatric Treatment Centre provides mainly counselling (i.e., individual and group) and a brief visit with a psychiatrist, if appropriate, to start you on medications. This service however, has no access to emergency psychiatric beds.

The Student Distress Centre (SDC)

The Student Distress Centre is a peer (i.e. student) run service that can provide you with support in dealing with depression and suicidal thoughts. The Student Distress Centre can also provide you with information and

referrals to other agencies when appropriate. You can access the service by phoning 492-HELP (4357), dropping by at 030-N SUB, or on-line at HYPERLINK "http://www.campuscrisischat.com" www.campuscrisischat.com.

The University of Alberta Chaplains' Association

University chaplains may be very helpful to you on a number of levels if your depression is related to the meaning or purpose of your life, a spiritual crisis, questions related to your values, or significant grief issues, to mention a few. Chaplains can provide you with support, guidance and faith based solutions to your life struggles. To get contact information for a chaplain of your faith, go on their website at HYPERLINK "http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/chaplains/" www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/chaplains/, or in an emergency page 491-2298.

Resources To Deal With Other Emotional Crises

If you are experiencing an emotional crisis, aside from depression and suicidal thoughts or intent, you may also benefit from additional resources and assistance. During your crisis, you may be experiencing a variety of feelings including anxiety, panic, guilt, shame, hopelessness, isolation, grief, fear, confusion, and aggression or homicidal intent. If your crisis is making these feelings unmanageable, you can access one of the following services:

The Student Distress Centre

This free student-run service can provide you with information, support and /or referral if you are having a crisis. You can access the Student Distress Centre by phoning 492-HELP (4357), dropping by at 030-N SUB, or on-line at HYPERLINK "http://www.campuscrisischat.com" www.campuscrisischat.com.

The 24 Hour Distress Line

The Distress Line is available to help you deal with any type of crisis, if you just want to talk to someone. Phone 482-HELP (4357) 24 hours per day and 7 days per week for assistance.

The UHC – Student Counselling Services (SCS)

A great option for getting help to deal with an emotional crisis on campus is UHC – Student Counselling Services. Psychologists/counsellors there will listen to your situation and help you develop a plan to overcome the crisis and any underlying concerns that may be weighing into it. Facing a crisis alone can be overwhelming, and family and friends may not be able to provide you with the information and emotional support you need. You can access SCS by either phoning 492-5205, or dropping by at 2-600 Students' Union Building.

The Faculty Of Education Clinical Services

The service is staffed by counsellors and psychologists in training who are working on their Masters and Ph.D. degrees in Counselling Psychology and supervised by registered psychologists. There is a nominal registration fee each academic year (September to May) for the service. Phone 492-3746 or drop by 1-135 Education North Building to book an appointment.

The Mobile Mental Health Crisis Intervention Service

In addition to helping you with feelings of depression and suicidal thoughts, the Mobile Mental Health Crisis Intervention Service can help you deal with other unhelpful feelings generated by a wide range of mental health issues. This service can be accessed 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, by phoning 482-0222, and depending on the nature of the assistance needed, you will either be assisted by phone or staff there will come to you. The service provided will be tailored to your needs.

The Psychiatric Treatment Clinic (U of A Hospital)

The Psychiatric Treatment Clinic can provide you with assistance for a wide variety of potential emotional crises. Please phone (407-6501) for information prior to attending the clinic, which is located in the Department of Psychiatry in the University of Alberta Hospital. Depending on availability, you will be scheduled for an assessment either at 8:30 a.m. or 12:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. The assessment can take up to four hours and will determine the services you will receive. Individual counselling, group counselling and consultation with a psychiatrist are some of the services they provide.

The University of Alberta Chaplains' Association

Chaplains are available to deal with a wide variety of crises, even those that are not strictly spiritually based. Check out their website at HYPERLINK "<http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/chaplains/>" www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/chaplains/, or in an emergency page 491-2298.

Phone 211 To Talk To Someone About Other Community Resources

By phoning 211, you will be able to get information about a wide variety of community resources, if the previous options do not successfully meet your needs. If phoning outside of the Edmonton area, you can receive the same assistance by phoning 482-INFO (4636).