

NEUROSCIENCE TREATMENT TEAM PARTNER PROGRAM

Team Solutions
**Avoiding
Crisis Situations**

By Eleanor W. Griffin

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Avoiding Crisis Situations

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Crises Can Happen Even if You've Been Feeling Well

Many people with mental illnesses have found ways to feel better and get on with their lives. But the danger of a crisis situation happening still exists—sometimes when you least expect it.

You may be feeling well. And then, one night, you may not sleep well. You may also start to have other early warning symptoms. But you may not notice them—until it's too late. Suddenly, you feel that things aren't going well for you. You begin to feel uneasy and get upset over things that are happening. Soon, everything seems out of control.

This doesn't always have to happen—there are things you can do to help yourself avoid crisis. This workbook has been written to provide you with ways to reduce the risk of crisis, and it explains what to do if a crisis should occur.



Risk Factors for Crises

Risk factors are things that may happen to you that can lead to a crisis situation. They can be stressful things that may happen to you—even good things that cause stress, such as starting a new job. Risk factors may also be things you're doing that may put you at risk for a crisis situation. Below are examples of risk factors that can lead to crisis:

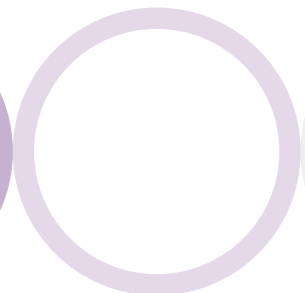
- You feel well and stop taking your medicine.
- You are about to meet new people at a support group.
- You are about to move into your own apartment.
- You are about to begin something new, like starting a new class.
- You feel stressed because of your work.
- You have a cold and start taking a cold medicine without checking with your doctor first.
- You do too many things on the same day and feel exhausted.
- You have an argument with a friend.
- You start having trouble sleeping, it doesn't get better, and you don't tell anyone.
- You have new symptoms or old symptoms that get worse and you don't tell your doctor or case manager.
- You start drinking alcohol or using street drugs.





What risk factors have led to a crisis situation or caused you to be sick before?

What other risk factors do you think may lead to a crisis for you?



Managing Symptoms

Even when they are feeling better, some people still have symptoms that haven't gone away yet. Here are some of the things they do to calm their fears and cope with symptoms.



- *"I take a shower. The water makes me feel relaxed."*
- *"I listen to my favorite music. It helps to drown out the voices."*
- *"Playing my guitar makes me feel less nervous."*
- *"I like to talk with my friends. Talking to them and doing things with them keeps my mind off my troubles."*
- *"Planning what I'm going to do tomorrow makes me feel less nervous."*
- *"I came up with a plan (with my doctor's help) to take extra medicine when I'm stressed out."*





What things have helped you cope with symptoms and fears before?



What things have made them worse?



What other ideas have you heard of? List them here:



**What are some of the things you plan to do to help yourself feel better?
Write them below:**

Managing Stressful Situations

Stress can affect the way you're feeling. Too much stress can eventually lead to a crisis. That's why it's so important to find ways to keep your stress at a comfortable level. There are many things you can do to relieve stress and help yourself feel better. Here are some ideas:

Exercise

Light physical activity can help relieve stress. It is important to speak with your doctor before starting any exercise program. Walking is good exercise because you can do it almost anywhere, anytime. You can walk with someone or by yourself. And you don't need any equipment. You don't have to walk far. Start out slowly and walk a little more each day. This is one way you can start walking to relieve stress:

- Walk to your mailbox and back.
- The next day, walk to the house or building next door and back.
- Next, walk to the end of your block and back.
- When you feel ready, walk around the corner and back, or even around the block.
- Take a break when you don't feel like walking.



What other activities would you like to do when you feel stressed?

Organize Your Time

Stress can happen when you don't feel like you have enough time, or if you have too much time. Feeling rushed for an appointment or waiting for a bus for a long time can be stressful. But there are things you can do to reduce your stress. Here are some ideas that some people use to manage their time better and reduce stress:

- *"I buy things I use often before I run out—like batteries, stamps, and bus tokens. That way, I can avoid feeling rushed at the last minute."*
- *"I give myself a few extra minutes to get where I'm going so I don't feel rushed."*
- *"When going someplace where I know I have to wait, like my doctor's office, I always bring a book, some needlework, or a tape player to pass the time."*



What are some things you can do to plan ahead?

What could you do while waiting at the doctor's office to make the time pass quickly?

Deep Breathing Exercises

When you feel stressed, deep breathing exercises can calm you down and help you feel better. Here is a deep breathing exercise you can do anywhere. All it takes is a few minutes, and you can do it as often as you like.

1. Sit or stand with your shoulders and back comfortable and straight. Put your hands on your stomach.
2. Take a slow, deep breath through your nose. Feel the air going to every part of your body. Feel your stomach expand as you breathe in.
3. Hold your breath for a few seconds before letting it out. Then breathe out slowly through your mouth. Feel the air leaving your body. Feel your stomach go down as you breathe out.
4. Start again by slowly breathing in through your nose, holding your breath for a few seconds, and breathing out through your mouth.
5. Do this four or five times, then sit or stand quietly for a minute.



Problem-Solving Skills

You can avoid crisis by learning how to handle things that bother you. A problem is something that's bothering you. There are three steps to effective problem solving.

Step 1. Identify the problem

You can't solve a problem until you know what it is. If you are upset about what someone said to you, that's an easy problem to identify. Sometimes, what's bothering you is several problems mixed together.

Think of something that's bothering you right now, or something that upset you recently. If it is a mix of more than one problem, pick one to describe first. **Write the problem down using just three words.**

My problem is:

Step 2. List what doesn't work

To find a solution that will work, it helps to rule out those that don't. **What have you tried in the past to solve this kind of problem that didn't work?**



Step 3. Find a better solution

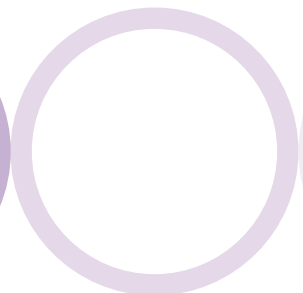
Explore new ideas of how you might solve your problem. You might want to ask a few friends or family members to help you. The more ideas the better! Write them all down. You can decide later which one to do first.

Try only one solution at a time. If it works, save it along with the others for next time. If it doesn't work, cross that solution off your list and try another.

Begin by saying your three-word problem out loud. Then let the ideas flow. **Use the space below to write down ideas on how you might solve the three-word problem you wrote on page 10.**



You may want to go over these ideas with friends, family members, or mental health care professionals you trust.



Examples of Effective Problem Solving

Let's take a typical problem and solve it using the problem-solving skills you've just learned.

Problem:

"I get stressed when I go to holiday dinners with my family. I dread it for days before. I get so anxious during dinner. Afterward, I feel bad for days."



What three words would you use to state this problem?

In Three Words:

"Anxious around family"

"When describing the problem, it wasn't the dinner or the holiday that caused stress. The stressful part was being with my family. That's the part I need to focus on."



What Doesn't Work:

Write down all of the things you've tried in the past that didn't work and the reasons why. Here are examples of what may have happened and how you may have felt.

- *"I feel uncomfortable when I do what they want."*
- *"I feel stressed out when I don't act like myself."*
- *"Everyone gets mad at me when I cancel at the last minute."*
- *"Some people get angry when I get there late and leave early."*
- *"Taking extra medicine makes me sleepy."*
- *"Drinking alcohol gave me courage but made me sick for days."*
- *"Having everyone to my house after dinner made things worse."*



If you've had this problem before, what have you tried that also didn't work?



Think of New Ideas:

- *“Tell my family what would make holiday dinners more enjoyable for me.”*
- *“Don’t go, but send gifts or cards so they know I’m thinking of them.”*
- *“Ask everyone to read about stress and anxiety so they understand how I feel and can plan a less stressful time.”*
- *“Plan a short trip out of town during that time.”*
- *“Ask a friend to join me so I won’t feel so alone with my family.”*

Which of these ideas sound good to you? Circle them. Cross out the ideas that sound like they wouldn’t work for you. Do you have other ideas of how this problem could be solved? **Write down your ideas below:**

My ideas are:

Putting Your New Skills Into Practice

It may take a while to get good at your new problem-solving skills. Like many other new things, the trick to becoming a good problem solver is to practice.

Think of a problem you are having right now.
Write down the problem here:



Problem:

Now, sum up the problem in just three words. Take your time. This can be hard to do. Stating your problem simply is important for finding the right solution.

In Three Words:

Do the three words you've chosen express your problem? If not, try again. When you're sure that the words you've chosen are the best, **write down the ways that didn't work when you tried to solve this problem in the past.**

What Doesn't Work:

Think of New Ideas:

Think of as many ideas as you can for solving this problem—ideas you’ve never tried or never even thought of before. The object is to think of all the possibilities for the problem you are working on. Other people may also be able to provide you with ideas. **Write all of these ideas below:**





The Most Important Step of All—Putting Your New Solution Into Action

It's time to choose one new idea and give it a try. Afterward, write down how it worked. Remember, if the new solution doesn't work, cross it off your list and choose another.

How my new solution worked:



Improving Communication Skills

Many people with a mental illness have a hard time understanding what others are saying. They also have a hard time expressing their thoughts and needs. Learning a few skills can make it easier for you to get what you need and want. Four skills are necessary for good communication:

1. Look

Look directly at the person you're talking to. That's a friendly way of showing you care about what the person is saying.

2. Listen

Listen as carefully as you can to what the other person is saying. If you didn't hear something they said, ask them to say it again or in another way.

3. Share

Let the other person know you've been listening—share your own thoughts and feelings about what's been said. It shows that you really were listening!

4. Ask

Get what you want and need by asking for it. Most people are happy to help once they understand your needs.



Try this:

Have a conversation with your case manager or a friend. Use the skills discussed on the previous page. Choose one of these topics:

- Describe your dinner last night, then listen to what your case manager or friend had for dinner.
- Describe something that happened at home, in class, or at work.
- Let your case manager or friend tell you about his or her hobby.



What Are You Really Saying?

Communicating with other people involves not only what you say, but also how you say it.

Try this:

Say this sentence in two different ways. The first time you say it, act happy and smile. The second time, act unhappy and sleepy. Here is the sentence:



“It’s morning time—time to wake up.”

What did it mean when you said this sentence in a happy tone of voice?



What did it mean when you said this sentence in a sleepy voice?

Practice Exercise: Describe How These People Are Feeling

Both people in the photographs below were ordering ice cream sundaes at an ice cream parlor. They each ordered the “super sundae.” When the sundaes were served, they discovered the ice cream was smothered in chocolate syrup. They each exclaimed, “Look at that sundae!”

Note the expression on each person’s face. Compare the way their bodies are positioned. Although both people said the same thing, the messages they are communicating are different. On the lines next to each photograph, describe how you think each person feels about the ice cream sundae they received.

How does she feel about her sundae?



How does he feel about his sundae?



Answer: One answer may be that the woman loves ice cream sundaes smothered with chocolate syrup. The man may not like the flavor of the ice cream or the syrup, or may not like too much syrup on his sundae.

Here are some tips that may help you. When you talk with another person:

- Face the person you're talking to. If you turn away, you might miss something they wanted to tell you.
- Look at their face. Sometimes it's easier to understand what people are saying when you can see their expression.
- Use your own expressions to show other people you're listening to what they're saying. For example, smiling when your friend tells you he's happy about something can show him you're paying attention.
- Some people find it helpful to use hand or body gestures to express themselves.



Identifying Situations That Are Hard for You

There may be times when you'll have to talk with other people to get what you need. This can be stressful for some people. Some people feel nervous talking on the phone. Others feel tense when they talk to people face to face.

Below are examples of situations that some people feel are stressful. Check off the ones that are stressful for you.

I find it hard to:

- Tell my doctor, nurse, or case manager exactly what I'm feeling
- Tell people what I need
- Talk easily with my family or friends
- Answer the phone when someone calls
- Answer the door when someone comes by
- Tell my family member I need to be alone right now
- Ride the bus and ask other people for directions
- Call my doctor, nurse, or case manager on the phone
- Talk to the cashier when I make a purchase
- Ask my pharmacist to refill my prescription



What other activities do you find hard to do?

Write them down here.

Practicing Your Communication Skills

This exercise may help you feel more relaxed when you talk on the phone. The phone is an important way for you to stay in touch with other people.

Making an Important Phone Call



Let's say you're having early warning symptoms. You need to call your doctor, nurse, or case manager right away. Think about the call in small, easy-to-manage steps. Focus on only one step at a time.

1. On a pad, write down who you will call and the phone number. Write down what you want to tell the person you're calling.
2. Dial the phone number.
3. When someone answers, introduce yourself and ask for the person you're calling. "This is (say your name), I need to speak to (say his or her name) right away. I'm having symptoms."
4. Relax as much as possible if they put you on "hold." Be patient. It may take a few minutes to find the person you're calling.
5. Stick to the facts. Tell the person you're calling exactly how you're feeling and what's happening. Be as specific as possible.
6. Write down everything you're told to do. Don't try to remember everything. Read back what you've written to make sure it's right. Then say "good-bye."
7. Follow the instructions you've written down.

Dealing With Visitors

Your friends and family members care about you a lot. When they know you're not feeling well, it is natural for them to want to see you and cheer you up.

Having visitors can be good—you may enjoy their company. But sometimes, having unexpected or unwanted visitors can be very stressful, especially when you aren't feeling well. It's important to learn how to keep those visits short, or avoid them completely, without being rude.

When asked how they handle unwanted visitors, some people replied:

- *"I pretend I'm not home."*
- *"I don't answer the door."*
- *"I tell them I can't talk to them right now."*
- *"I open the door and say I'm on the phone—I'll talk to you another time."*
- *"I invite them in if I'm up to it, act pleasant, then send them away in a few minutes."*

You may not feel well enough to have a visitor. These are some ways that people avoid unwanted guests without being rude.

- Without opening the door, say you're not feeling well but that you're glad they stopped by.
- Open the door, explain that you're not feeling well and that you'll call when you feel better.
- Invite the person in for "just a few minutes" because you're not feeling well.

What other ways can you think of to avoid unwanted guests without being rude?

Taking Control of Your Life

Everyone has a limit to what they can do and what makes them feel comfortable. Below is a list of statements that can help you feel more relaxed in your life. Which ones are right for you?

"I feel more comfortable when I..."

- *do only one thing at a time instead of doing everything at once."*
- *avoid people, places, and things that I feel uneasy about."*
- *do something new when I feel up to it."*
- *keep my sense of humor."*
- *break big tasks into small, easy-to-handle parts."*
- *ask for what I need without being afraid."*
- *solve my problems while they're still small."*
- *spot early warnings of a possible crisis and do something about it right away."*
- *celebrate a success every day."*

Remember that setbacks are also a part of life. Stay focused on your successes and your goals. What other things can you do to take control of your life?



Getting Your Family and Friends to Help You Avoid Crisis

Your family members and friends can help you avoid crisis. The more they know about you and your illness, the better prepared they will be to help you when you're in need. These are some of the things you can do to prepare your family members and friends to help you avoid crisis:

- Teach them about your illness and your needs.
- Share your feelings with them.
- Make sure they know your early warning symptoms.
- Have them talk to your doctor, nurse, case manager, or other member of your treatment team so they can help you plan what to do to prevent a crisis situation.
- Suggest they join a support group for family members and friends.
- Teach them what to do if an emergency situation should happen.

When you feel that a crisis situation may be coming, what can your family members and friends do to help you avoid it?



Taking Steps to Prevent Crisis

Avoiding a crisis means taking action in advance to prevent a crisis from occurring.

- Keep track of your early warning symptoms.
- Ask a close family member or friend to help you monitor your symptoms.
- Take your medicine as directed by your doctor.
- Talk to your doctor, nurse, pharmacist, or other member of your treatment team before starting any new medicines (including nonprescription medicines).
- Keep to a regular sleep schedule.
- Ask for help with activities that may cause stress.
- Avoid situations that you feel are too stressful for you.
- Do not use alcohol or street drugs.
- Call your doctor, nurse, case manager, or other member of your treatment team right away if you notice early warning symptoms or need their help in avoiding a crisis.





Other things I can do to avoid crisis:



People Who Can Help You in a Crisis

Record the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the people you can call for help. Ask your case manager to make copies. Give one copy to each person on the list so they know about each other. Keep your copy in a place that's handy so you'll be able to get it when you need it.

My doctor



Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

My case manager

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____



My family



Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

My friends

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

Making a Crisis Prevention Plan

When things are quiet and calm, it's a good time to plan what to do if a crisis should occur. Having such a plan will make it easier for you to know what to do if you have a problem. It's a good idea to create your crisis plan with the people you plan to call if you need help. You'll get more ideas by making everyone a part of the plan.



1. Which of my early warning symptoms require a quick response?

2. Whom should I call first if I need help?

3. Who will call and stay in touch with my doctor, nurse, or case manager if I can't do it myself?



4. What should I do when I feel out of control?

5. Sometimes, the hospital can't give any information to the people who are helping me. Can we set up a plan ahead of time with my treatment team so information can be given to the people who are helping me?



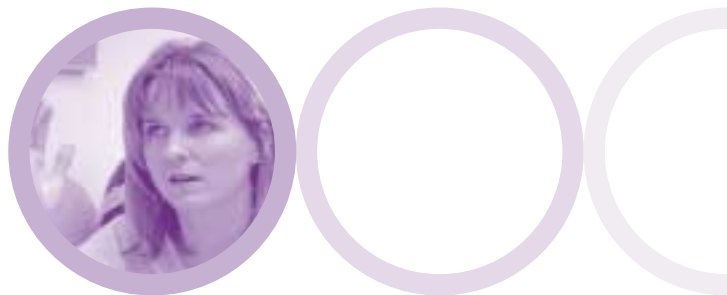
Write your plan here:

Crisis Situations Don't Have to Happen to You

Keeping stress at an even, comfortable level is one way to keep yourself from heading toward a crisis. Stressful situations can't be avoided entirely. But knowing how to solve problems before they get too big, and knowing how to communicate the way you feel, may help you handle stressful situations more easily.

Knowing when to ask for help is also important. Don't be shy about asking family members or friends to be involved in your Crisis Prevention Plan. They may see things that are happening to you before you do—and they can alert you that it's time to take action.

Finally, be sure to keep doing the things that will help you feel well—take your medicine every day, visit your doctor regularly, get the right balance of rest and exercise, and watch for early warning symptoms. All of this may not seem necessary, especially if you're feeling well. But as many clients have discovered, these are some of the best ways you can help yourself prevent crisis situations from interfering with your life.



Published Information and Support for Clients, Families, and Friends

Books

Court, Bryan L., and Nelson, Gerald E. *Bipolar Puzzle Solution*. Accelerated development, Taylor and Francis, 1996.

Hatfield, Agnes B., and Lefley, Harriet P. *Surviving Mental Illness: Stress, Coping and Adaptation*. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1993.

Moorman, Margaret. *My Sister's Keeper*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1992.

Mueser, Kim T., and Gingerich, Susan. *Coping with Schizophrenia*. Oakland, Calif: New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 1994.

Sheehan, Susan. *Is There No Place on Earth for Me?* Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.

Torrey, E. Fuller, MD. *Surviving Schizophrenia: A Manual for Families, Consumers, and Providers*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1995.

Woods, Rebecca. *When Someone You Love Has a Mental Illness: A Handbook for Family, Friends, and Caregivers*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Perigee Books, 1992.

Journals

NAMI Advocate, published bimonthly by NAMI. Cost is \$25 per year, and is free to NAMI members. Orders to NAMI, 200 North Glebe Road, Suite 1015, Arlington, VA 22203-3754.

Schizophrenia Bulletin, a quarterly publication of the Schizophrenia Research Branch of NIMH, contains excellent summaries of evolving research. Cost is \$17 per year. Orders to Superintendent of Documents, New Orders, PO Box 371954, Pittsburgh, PA 15250-7954.

Schizophrenia Research, published by Elsevier Science Company, contains recent advances in understanding the causes and treatments of schizophrenia.

Videotapes

Out of Darkness, ABC movie starring Diana Ross (1994). Many AMI groups have copies you can borrow.

Schizophrenia: Surviving in the World of the Normals (1991), and *A Love Story: Living With Someone With Schizophrenia* (1991). Wellness Productions, 23945 Mercantile Rd., Beachwood, OH 44122-5924. 216-831-9209; 800-669-9208. Two 58-minute presentations; videotape \$69.95, shipping \$7.00.

Courses

“Educating Patients and Families About Mental Illness” by Cynthia Carson Bisbee, PhD, Aspen Publishers, Inc., Gaithersburg, MD.

“Journey of Hope: Family Education and Support Program” by Joyce C. Burland, PhD, Donna M. Mayeux, and Diane Gill, PO Box 2547, Baton Rouge, LA 70821.

“NurSeminars” by Mary D. Moller, MSN, RN, Center for Patient and Family Mental Health Education, 13523 W. Shore Rd., Nine Mile Falls, WA 99026.

Board Game

“Beat Mental Illness: An Educational Board Game,” available from Partnership for Recovery, at 205-933-0735.