CRISIS AND THE CLASSROOM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Hill has had varied experience with education, crisis, and crisis management. She began her teaching career in the 1970s working in the Panama Canal Zone with "at risk" and abused children, as well as children with learning disabilities. For the next 18 years she taught at all levels including primary school, junior and senior high, and adult education, teaching English, Spanish, and English as a Second Language. Throughout these years Deborah supplemented her teaching by working as a triage administrator and interpreter in hospital emergency, cardiology, and children's wards, and a psychiatric hospital. Her summers were spent as a study-abroad tour director in Europe, frequently having to deal with critical problems associated with international travel and education. As a result of her experiences she organized and edited the publication *Crisis, Emergencies and the Study Abroad Program.* This was presented along with other crisis managers at the American Embassy in Pamplona, Spain to people orientating American students abroad.

After receiving a Master's Degree and Ph.D. in romance languages, linguistics, and Spanish Renaissance Comedy she accepted a teaching position at Ohio State University. During her academic career she authored two books on the psychology of humor for teachers: *Humor in the Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers (and Other Entertainers)* and *School Days, Fun Days: Creative Ways to Teach Humor Skills in the Classroom.* She subsequently embarked on a ten-year career as an international news journalist. In this capacity she covered news events that allowed her to witness many kinds of crises and emergencies. She also covered politics, working with then Ohio Governor, now Senator, George Voinavich on trade missions to Southeast Asia and the then recently opened Eastern Europe. Her sports coverage won her a regional Emmy award for NBC coverage of the Barcelona Olympics.

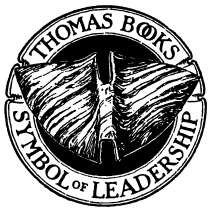
As an itinerant teacher and journalist she has lived around the country as well as the world visiting a wide variety of schools in the process. She therefore brings an international perspective to the subject of crisis management in American education. She is currently based in London, England, most recently working as an education administrator with schools and teacher union representatives. The Local Education Authority in which she works deals with the often contentious and complex aspects of teacher capability, disciplinary, and grievance issues.

CRISIS AND THE CLASSROOM

A Practical Guide for Teachers

By

DEBORAH J. HILL, PH.D.



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INTRODUCTION

Every teacher I know is a crisis manager. At the same time, most teachers I know go into teaching to teach. Few of us expect that crisis will touch us or that we will be called upon to rise to extraordinary occasions with little or no notice. Nevertheless most teachers do so, sometimes on a daily basis. Human resource specialists call this "people skills." Few teachers would consider putting this on a resume even though it turns out to be a rather important prerequisite for the job. The purpose of this book is to share knowledge from personal experience as well as information culled from multiple and varied specialists in the field of emergency services and crisis management. I believe it will also be helpful to tell you something about my own experience in the classroom and with crisis.

First and foremost I knew I wanted to be a teacher from when I was very young. As far as crisis is concerned, however, I was born into a naive age. Like a lot of baby boomers, my first teachers thought *The Atomic Café* was a serious film. At my elementary school we went through air raid drills and learned how to hide under little desks in preparation for the dropping of an atomic bomb. Americans in the 50s, 60s, and 70s experienced the Cold War and our parents fought in World War II. Most of the threats we experienced, however, were based on fears about what *might* happen rather than what anyone actually experienced firsthand. To be sure there was a war in Vietnam. But that war was so far away most people would not have been able to find Southeast Asia on a map. Returning Vietnam veterans discovered a nation that really did not comprehend the true nature of that war. During the Cold War years terrorism in schools and in the wider community had yet to touch the American spirit quite as dramatically as it has in recent years. The idea that someone might walk into a school and shoot innocent teachers or students was not considered to be a remote possibility thirty years ago. Installing metal detectors to prevent students from bringing firearms to class would have seemed too far-fetched to even imagine. Now all that has changed. Todays schools are faced with critical situations on multiple levels virtually every day of the year.

The kinds of crises I have experienced as a news journalist were probably more poignant than emergencies I experienced in the traditional classroom. Yet I always believed that many of the ways that crisis is dealt with in the wider, often violent and volatile world could be applied to crisis management in American schools. This has become particularly clear to me in recent years. Most people have ideas about what they think they would do if faced with a crisis. The fact is that no one knows how he or she will react until the moment is at hand. People who are considered fearless sometimes panic during an emergency. Conversely someone who seems hopeless may suddenly rise to an occasion and become the hero of the day. I am reminded of a time when I found myself in the midst of a spontaneous coup in a major foreign city. As soon as the first shots were fired I thought nothing of dropping to the ground clutching at a filthy gutter until the tanks rolled past. I reacted just like everyone else including well-dressed women carrying designer shopping bags. During any emergency we rely on our instincts as well as our training to survive.

It does not matter where in the world a crisis may strike. Human beings around the world react similarly in an emergency. Having experienced several riots I have consistently observed that during such times the normal laws of society simply break down. Initially most people think only about how to survive during periods of social terror. I have seen normally decent people suddenly turn into looters as a result of a temporary period of lawlessness and unusual permissiveness. I have also seen people normally considered social outcasts to risk their lives to save someone who ordinarily would not have given them the time of day. What quite often happens is that crisis tests us. No one knows what they are made of until such a test is faced. The better one is prepared beforehand for such tests, the more likely he or she will succeed in coping with the tasks that need to be confronted on the day.

For the purposes of this book a "crisis" is defined as a disaster, emergency, calamity, or catastrophe that is usually time-limited and associated with danger. Often a crisis represents a turning point in the previous state of affairs. In every case crisis involves change or a loss of some kind. Some crises mature over a short or long period of time while others are instantaneous, situational events, or unexpected accidents. Crisis may also arrive in the form of natural disasters or as random violence coming from within the school or from outside. Aside from social crises people can experience a personal crisis that may be caused by many factors. In addition to traditional crises, the scope of this book has been expanded to include critical school-related issues, including the drug crisis, teenage pregnancy, and truancy. Crisis often involves highly emotional events that have far-reaching and long-term effects on those who experience them. The following change-of-

life critical situations often lead to feelings of anxiety, confusion, and depression that are usually associated with crisis:

- A death (family, friends, leaders, or celebrities)
- Major financial changes (loss of job, bankruptcy, loss of a second income)
- Moving home
- Losing one's home or treasured possessions (to fire, flood, or other natural disaster)
- Divorce or separation from loved ones
- Anything real or perceived to be a catastrophic loss to the individual
- Anything real or perceived to be a major humiliation or loss of face, or loss of honor or reputation
- Major life changes (pregnancy, midlife crisis, menopause, infirmity)

Denial that a crisis could ever occur is a dangerous way to approach crisis management. If anything positive has come out of school-related disasters in recent years it is that everyone now realizes that no one can afford to be complacent any longer. When schools are so busy trying to run the daily business of educating the local community of young people, it is tempting to procrastinate the establishment of an emergency preparedness program.

The corporate world was perhaps the first to realize that there was a need for crisis preparation and management. In 1982, Johnson & Johnson was faced with the nightmare of having seven people die from tainted Tylenol capsules. Rather than allow the crisis to destroy them, the company not only went on to restore faith in their product, in addition, they championed the way for future companies who might suffer similar unexpected catastrophes. Here are some of the things Johnson & Johnson was able to do many years later when a similar event occurred:

- Cancellation of all promotional campaigns
- Instant setting up of toll-free, 24-hour information hot-lines
- Speedy issuance of informative press releases

It is easy to see how the above measures could be applied to schools. It is also noteworthy that two of the crisis management actions involve communication. In the immediate aftermath of a crisis it is often the lack of available and correct information that most frustrates worried parents and other interested observers. In introducing a book about crisis in the classroom I recall Gary Larson's cartoon of the burning hospital about to go over a waterfall. This cartoon illustrates the general nature of most crises. In the cartoon there is not just a fire. There is a fire in a building full of sick people who need to be rescued. On top of that there is virtually no time because the hospital is about to be swept over the waterfall. Crisis rarely exists as a single incident. Neither is there likely to be sufficient time to prepare for it once it

arrives. Almost every crisis has its unique complications and a single disaster inevitably spawns multiple consequences. As the saying goes, when it rains, it pours.

Content and Format

The one thing that all crises have in common is that they involve people. Human beings either initiate a crisis, find themselves having to experience it, or discover they are in the position of having to manage it. The first chapters of this book, therefore, focus on aspects of human nature that can lead to a crisis. When someone initiates a crisis by means of violence, the first question people ask is why. Part One of this book concentrates on aspects of human behavior that attempt to answer this most basic question. When people behave antisocially or violently, most people immediately look to the family environment for a cause. The first chapter in this section is a review of family systems, particularly the dysfunctional family. A discussion of personality disorders is followed by a review of some of the more negative aspects of human nature, as shown both by individuals and by humans, functioning as a society. In addition to a review of social factors there is particular emphasis on self-defeating and self-destructive behaviors that often lead to crisis.

Part II concentrates on the management of anger and violence. While anger has a healthy and important function, it is often the most dangerous of human emotions. In most cases anger that leads to violence and aggression also leads to crisis. Part II also reviews some successful and unsuccessful disciplinary practices used to deal with misbehavior including problems associated with absenteeism and truancy. Chapters seven and eight deal with the specific issues of teenage pregnancy and the drug crisis in schools.

After the initial euphoria of total anarchy that crisis often causes, most people are deeply relieved when law and order is finally restored. The only things that prevent the temporary lawlessness from becoming permanent is the training that civilized people have as a result of their parental upbringing, their respect for the laws of their society, and pride in their nationhood. Similarly, in the mini-society of any school, it is ultimately this deep inner sense of what is right and wrong that inspires people to do the right thing when no visible authority is there to police individual behavior. Training and basic self-defense techniques, assertiveness skills, and disaster preparedness are therefore significant aspects of crisis management and are reviewed in this book. Part IV of the book concentrates on negotiation and communication skills that are often the most crucial aspects of successful crisis management programs.

The final section of the book is about healing. The information has been gathered from a variety of sources. In particular the chapter on grief and loss is the result of interviewing many people around the world over the past 15 years in the wake of a variety of tragedies. The residents of St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin islands are typical of a group of people who lost everything as a result of Hurricane Andrew. No matter where or how people experience loss they will feel similar emotions throughout the grieving and healing process. This section of the book also looks at practical ways to cope with the aftermath of crisis including stress management techniques, various forms of traditional and alternative therapies, and the use of humor as a defense mechanism and coping strategy.

The subject of crisis in the classroom is a broad one. As life seems to become more complicated and hectic it can be difficult to keep up with all the information one needs. This is particularly true as a result of the enormous amount of information available on the Internet. One of the purposes of this book is to gather practical information and to organize and consolidate it for easy reference. Some of the information may be more relevant for some schools than for others at any particular time. Most of the chapters can be referred to on their own as needed. Although this book was originally written for teachers, it may also prove helpful to anyone who is associated with schools. I have tried to be as candid as possible about sharing some of my own experiences throughout the book. I also welcome any feedback from readers that might improve or enhance future editions. What I would actually hope is that no one has to experience either a personal or a school-related crisis or disaster ever in their lifetime. Unfortunately, that is not what life has ever been about. I trust that the information in this book will be useful should the worst ever occur, either in your personal or your professional life.

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CRISIS AND THE CLASSROOM

Part I

PSYCHO-SOCIAL ASPECTS OF CRISIS

Part I is an introduction to the complexities of human nature, starting with the family. The nature of the family has changed radically over the course of the past three decades and many attribute characteristics of troubled youth to the individual's upbringing. Of particular note is the so-called "dysfunctional family," although many factors may contribute to the initiation of anger and frustration in young people. In many cases unhappy childhood experiences or traumas will lead to various personality disorders. Anyone can feel emotionally troubled at different times of life. Such states of mind and the emotions that go with them only become troublesome when they prevent an individual from functioning in a positive and productive way. Self-destructive behavior or aggression directed outwards are often the result.

The final chapter in this section is a review of human nature. While it is impossible to put human beings into neat categories it is also true that all human beings share basic instincts, emotions, desires, and dislikes. Chapter 3 also discusses some of the negative social attitudes that can lead to disruptive behavior in individuals, either in the classroom or elsewhere. Everyone has the potential to choose either the positive or negative side of his or her human nature. People can choose to love or they can decide to hate. This negative aspect of character is sometimes referred to as the "shadow." Acknowledging the existence of the shadow is important in recognizing the ever-present potential for goodness as well as evil in all human beings.

Chapter 1

FAMILY SYSTEMS

The traditional "nuclear" family may still be an ideal, but it is no longer a guaranteed reality. Divorce is now a common occurrence as is single parenthood. In spite of multiple changes in traditional family structure, the impact on children has not altered significantly. Children still suffer trauma around the loss of love as well as feelings about living in an unsafe world. Individuals do not exist alone or interact with their environments on their own. So often when looking at the critical problems with students in our schools, the answer can be found in dysfunctional family dynamics. Everyone is affected when disorders become part of a family system, including teachers and fellow students. The purpose of this chapter is to review some of the family dysfunctions that so often lead to crisis in schools.

What is a "Dysfunctional Family?"

I do not know anyone who does not have a dysfunctional family. Overbearing mothers, absentee workaholic fathers, alcoholism, favoritism, sadistic sibling rivalry, and emotional instability are fairly common family problems. Every family also has their ups and downs, the skeletons in their closets and crises they must face together, whatever image they may want to project to friends and neighbors. By no means does such a statement intend to trivialize the trauma of growing up. What I would suggest is that growing up is traumatic for everyone. It is also true that some families are seriously more dysfunctional than others. In addition all families are more dysfunctional at some times than at others. This reality does not make dysfunctions in the family, such as alcoholism or compulsive gambling, any easier to deal with. It does, however, sometimes help to relieve the potentially overwhelming influence of such dysfunctions. The worst dysfunctions are those with emotional consequences that last a lifetime. These are not situations that