

Crisis Counseling for Non-Psychotherapists

These guidelines are for use only in an emergency when no mental health professional or experienced counselor is available. They come with no guarantees. Their use is at the user's discretion.

1. The physical safety of the recipient (the victim of the crisis) is the first priority. Make sure they do not intend to harm themselves or anyone else. How? By asking them direct questions. The risk is higher if they possess the motive, the means (pills, weapon, etc.), a history of violence, a drug or alcohol problem, and a family history in which someone has killed themselves or someone else. If any of these apply, call 911.
2. Check them for injuries and, if necessary, apply first aid.
3. Assure them that they have made it through whatever crisis occurred and are in a place of safety now.
4. If they are too upset to speak, ask them to take ten deep breaths with you. If you have them available, offer a comb or brush and a small glass of water: "You'll feel better if you take a moment for yourself."
5. Asking someone to look out for a pet can be calming. "My dog is looking pretty anxious—would you mind petting him for a moment?"
6. Encourage them to tell you in detail what happened. Ask specific questions. This will help ground them in the present and give them time to get over some of their shock.
7. If they aren't ready to talk about what happened, ask them questions about themselves: "What's your first name? Do you live around here?" etc.
8. Allow them to express whatever feelings arise, including anger, grief, and bewilderment. Use empathic statements to show your understanding of what they say. If you can't tolerate their sorrow or anger or other emotions, the next step is to find someone who can.
9. Make appropriate physical contact with them—hand on shoulder, holding hands, hugging, etc.--*if* it seems appropriate and seems to help ground them.
10. Praise them for the strengths they reveal during the crisis (e.g., "You sure were right about such-and-such happening").
11. If you have survived a similar situation, say so and tell them about it: how you felt, how you managed it, etc.
12. Counter self-blame and self-criticism with positive, rational, confident statements that enhance self-worth and deemphasize helplessness and what can't be done in favor of what can.
13. Get a sense of which behaviors are worsening the crisis and point this out to discourage cycles of self-defeating behavior.
14. Help them select two or three urgent, simple goals to accomplish in the present, and work with them on exactly how they should go about it. Having something to do should help them feel stronger and more effective.
15. Find out which friends and relatives they can contact for immediate support.

16. Suggest some local resources (e.g., a doctor or emergency room for a physical injury, a shelter for domestic violence, a place to stay after an earthquake).
17. Strategize about how to eventually reunite them with friends and family.
18. Reassure them that they can survive this, and tell them how they can contact you if they need further support from you.