

Navigating a Crisis

For Jane Ehrman, now 68, a life-defining crisis came when she was a 37-year-old mother diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer. Ann Kaiser Stearns, 76, says her life was rocked by a long-ago divorce and a close friend's suicide. Charly Jaffe, 29, endured a series of crises, including sexual assault, a severe sports injury, and a near-death experience when she was just a young college student.

All of these women say they are stronger today for the trials they've faced—and have dedicated their lives to helping others find that strength.

Ehrman, who lives in Cleveland, is a stress relief coach for first responders and people facing medical crises. Stearns, a professor at the Community College of Baltimore County, is a psychologist and author of several books, including *Living Through Personal Crisis*. Jaffe left a job at Google to help run a yoga school in Australia and now works as a crisis counselor, while finishing a master's degree in psychology and education at Columbia University. She also helped her father, entrepreneur Richard Jaffe, write a book called *Turning Crisis into Success*.

Crisis changes all of our lives, says cognitive scientist Art Markman, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin.

"Those kinds of events create a tear in the fabric of your life story. Your life was one way before the event and another way afterward," he says. Once a crisis recedes, Markman says, "Your job is to reweave the story of your life." Most of us manage to do that, eventually.

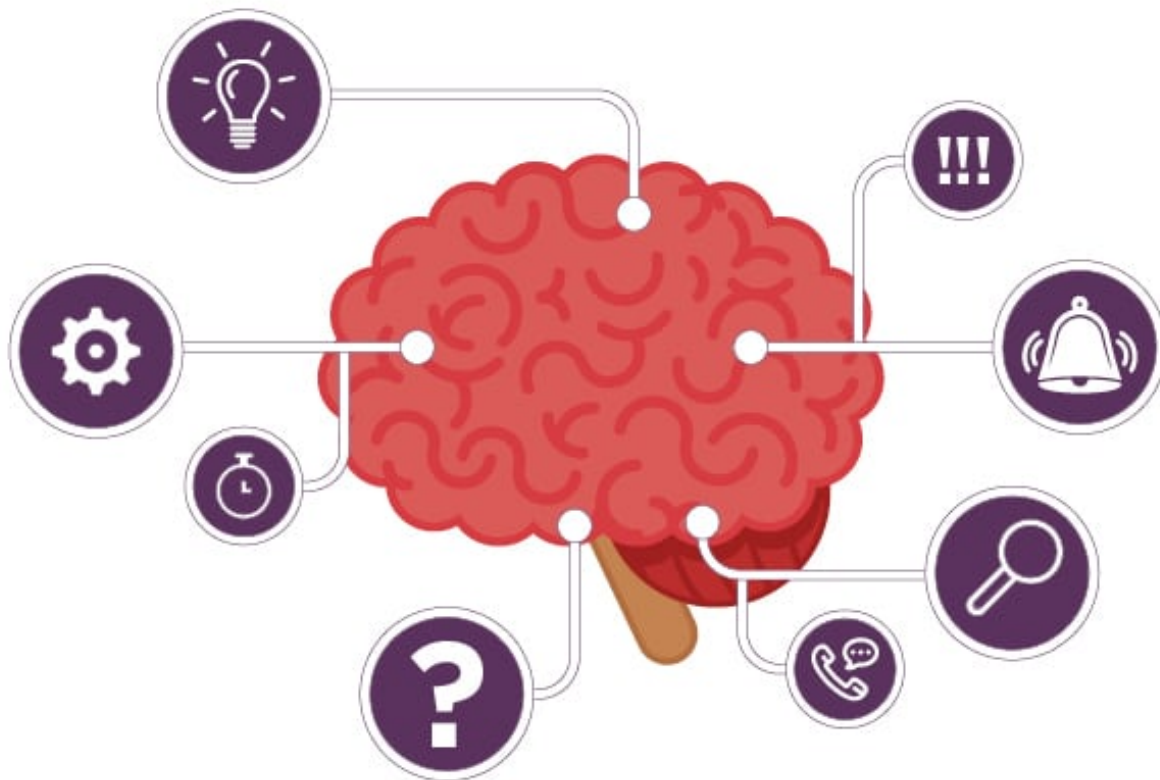


But along the way, many of us make a few very human mistakes.

This Is Your Brain on Crisis

The first stage of a crisis is often an emergency—the moment you see your spouse collapse from a heart attack, smell the smoke coming from your kitchen, or hear the roar of an approaching tornado.

At such moments, Markman says, our bodies and brains prepare for action: “You breathe in a way that brings a lot of oxygen in; your heart rate goes up. Your focus of attention narrows so you can pay attention to what is going on in that situation.”





It's the classic fight or flight response, and, when it works well, it helps us do the things we immediately need to do—calling 911 and getting an aspirin for the heart attack victim or gathering family members to escape the fire or reach the basement before the tornado hits. People in this state famously find the strength to lift heavy objects and fight off wild animals.

But people in danger also make baffling errors of judgment. They stand on the beach after a tsunami warning or run back into a burning house for a wallet. They convince themselves that their drooping face can't possibly be a sign of stroke and take a nap instead of going to a hospital. That's why we have drills and awareness campaigns to teach us what to do in such emergencies. Practice and a script can help us overcome denial and shock, Markman says.

That means, he says, that many of us stumble around in a state in which our thinking and emotional skills are dulled.

Misssteps During Crisis

Here are some common mistakes people make while in that fog, according to the experts.

- *They make big, irreversible decisions.* Widows sell the family home. Angry ex-spouses burn old photos. Hurricane survivors flee their communities, leaving lifelong support systems behind. Stearns, the Baltimore psychology professor, says her rule of thumb for anyone in crisis is “don't destroy it, don't give it away, and don't sell it.” Markman agrees: “Whenever possible, kick the can down the road,” and save big decisions for later.
- *They isolate themselves.* “Social interactions are a wonderful salve,” Markman says. Stearns says our need for social support in times of distress goes deep. “We were made to be pack animals. We are made to survive with others.”
- *They confide in the wrong people.* “It's really important to avoid negative people,” Stearns says. “There are people who will judge us, people who will not keep confidences, people who will try to fix us, and some of those wrong people are our own family members, unfortunately.”
- *They pretend to be fine.* When Jaffe returned to college after a serious injury and life-threatening complications, she was suffering symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. “But I didn't want to share it with anyone because I was afraid people would think I was crazy,” she says. “Instead, I would have a panic attack, wash my face, and go back to class and ask for the notes I had missed.”
- *They reject professional help.* “It's not a bad thing to have someone to talk to who has some training and has no vested interest in how things come out,” Markman says. It's especially urgent to reach out if you suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress, such as flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, or symptoms of depression, such as hopelessness, lack of interest in life, or thoughts of suicide.
- *They beat themselves up.* Too many people listen to a harsh inner judge at times of distress, says Ehrman, the Cleveland stress relief coach. “We tell ourselves we are stupid, we are incapable, or we never do anything right.” Many ruminate on upsetting events, looking for where



they went wrong, Markman says. “They keep asking, ‘Did I miss the signs? Is there something I could have done?’”

What Happens When a Crisis Lasts?

When disaster leads to an ongoing crisis—a long hospital stay, a ruined home, the aftermath of a death—our brains and bodies often stay in stress mode. We may not have a script for what to do then.

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Art Markman

That’s the position many people find themselves in when they become caregivers for a loved one with dementia or another serious long-lasting condition.

Stearns says too many people in that difficult situation succumb to what some social scientists call John Henryism—the affliction of the legendary steel-driving man who worked so hard at a seemingly impossible task that he died.

In her book *Redefining Aging: A Caregiver’s Guide to Living Your Best Life*, Stearns urges caregivers



to find other role models. While we often express admiration for apparently tireless caregivers, those who never take a break risk their own health, she says.

Caregivers who find and use outside support are more likely to find meaning in their caregiving journeys, Stearns says. Those who go it alone are more likely to feel overwhelmed and spent.

Finding a Way Through

Most people are more resilient in a crisis than they think they will be, the experts say.

“Bear in mind that every life is ultimately touched by something that we consider tragedy,” Markman says. “Human psychology is fairly well designed to withstand those crises.”

While there is no single correct path to healing, “hope is looking at your situation realistically and finding a way through,” Ehrman says.

In her case, finding a way through a mastectomy and chemotherapy meant going to a therapist who taught her how to take her mind to better places—through a technique called guided imagery. Once she was healthy, she went back to school to get a master’s degree in education, with a focus on mind and body medicine. Today, she teaches guided imagery and self-hypnosis to others in distress.

Stearns also responded to crisis, a divorce at age 27, by going back to school. Seven years later, she had a doctorate degree in psychology. Later, she adopted two daughters and went on to write four books. She has faced other crises such as the suicide death of a friend and the deaths of family members, including her mother.

Losses never get easy, she says, but you do learn from them. “One of the most important things to understand from the beginning is that you have to be kind to yourself, because healing takes time, and you are going to feel bad before you feel better,” says Stearns.

Here are some things you can do to ease the pain:

- *Assemble a support team.* Your crisis may call for professional help—financial advisors, lawyers, physicians. But you also need people who will hold your hand and listen to you without judgment, Stearns says. Make a list of friends, family members, co-workers, neighbors, or others who might be willing to lend a hand—and then start asking them to do so.
- *Accept help.* It’s OK to tell eager-to-help neighbors and friends what you need—whether it’s a meal for your family, a walk for your dog, or a trim for your lawn. “We have this false belief that asking for help is a sign of weakness, but it’s a sign of strength; it’s a willingness to be vulnerable,” Jaffe says. Be prepared with a specific list of ways people can help. When someone asks what they can do, pull out your list. It might include picking up prescriptions and groceries, bringing meals, helping you with household chores, or taking shifts with your loved one so that you can get out.
- *Keep up routines.* If you love your job and you can work during a crisis, do it. Keep going to



worship services, fitness classes, sporting events, and other places where your crisis is not on the agenda. “We all need some places where we don’t have to talk about whatever it is we are grieving,” Stearns says.

- *Treat yourself.* After her mother’s death, Stearns says she looked for ways to be kind to herself. She started getting regular manicures and keeping fresh flowers in her house—habits she maintains more than a decade later. When you do get time away, make it meaningful, relaxing, restorative, or fun. In other words, do not squander it on laundry, cleaning, or shopping. Instead, visit friends, see a movie, or go to a grandchild’s school play. Or find a quiet spot to read, knit, or play a favorite game with a friend.
- *Tell stories.* In the days after a death, people often tell the story of the loved one’s last hours over and over. When we go through any trauma—from a car crash to a nasty fall—we often feel the urge to tell that story repeatedly as well. That can be healthy, Markman says, if we are able to put together “a coherent story—something that you can pick up as a whole and put down as a whole.” Writing in a journal can help in the same way, he and other experts say.

Most of us will make it to brighter days. And it’s good to remember that, Stearns says: “There are times when we all feel powerless and weak, but in the back of your mind, you can say that ‘someday I’ll be strong.’ You just have to say that down the road, you will take this pain and do something good with it. You will find ways to learn from it.”



PREPARING FOR THE NEXT CRISIS

If your life is crisis-free right now, congratulations. You are living in the proverbial calm before (or between) the storms of life. That means you have a chance to prepare for the next crisis—even if you don't know what it will be.

Here are a few ways to do that:



Get trained. Everyone should know CPR, the signs of a stroke, and how to stop a life-threatening bleed. Check with local hospitals and Red Cross chapters for class schedules. Many will send trainers to your business or community group.



Maintain or build a community. If you move, get to know your neighbors. If all of your neighbors have moved, get to know the new folks. If your ties are slipping, work on re-connecting with family and friends and building new connections through volunteer work, hobbies, or whatever makes sense for you.



Build a basic disaster supply kit. The essentials include at least a three-day supply of food and water, extra batteries, and a first aid kit, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Details can be found at ready.gov.



Save responsibly. No matter how much money you have invested, you also need some ready cash, in case of an emergency. Rule of thumb: Have a minimum of three to six months of income you can access without disturbing retirement accounts.



Take good care of yourself. Sleep well, eat nourishing food, and stay physically active. Give meditation a try. If you are burned out before the crisis hits, recovery will be even harder.



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