

THE ROLE OF CRISES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. Crises are often viewed negatively as disruptions that hinder individuals and social groups. However, crises can also present opportunities for growth and development. This article explores psychological concepts that perceive crises as catalysts for change, motivating individuals to seek help and find constructive solutions in difficult situations. The article examines various psychological theories on crises. It discusses the different ways individuals respond to crises, ranging from effectively managing them to experiencing mental breakdowns. Crises have complex symptoms and causes, influenced by personal and environmental factors such as family, workplace, material status, and social groups. Anxiety is a common characteristic of crises, often reaching a high level before individuals acknowledge the need for concrete actions. Quick fixes like medication provide temporary relief but do not resolve the underlying crisis. Crises often involve conflicts and decision-making, where passivity becomes a negative and destructive choice. The article also explores crises in developmental terms, drawing upon Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration. Erikson identifies specific crises in each stage of development, while Dąbrowski emphasizes the role of tension and disruption in achieving higher levels of personal growth. Not all crises lead to development, and not all changes constitute developmental changes. Developmental changes are irreversible, sequential, autonomous, unidirectional, and goal-oriented. The article categorizes development into continuous, leap, and crisis development, highlighting the transformative nature of crisis-induced changes. The article argues that crises, despite their hardships, should be viewed as opportunities for personal and collective development. By confronting crises and actively seeking constructive solutions, individuals and communities can achieve higher levels of growth and improve their quality of life.

Keywords: crisis; crisis situation; stress, phases of stress; consequences of stress

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1. Introduction

Crises are usually considered in a negative context – as undesirable phenomena that disrupt the normal functioning of an individual or social groups. According to one of the classic definitions of a crisis, formulated by Gerard Caplan, a crisis constitutes a reaction of a previously healthy person to a difficult situation, in which such a person is unable use already possessed problem-solving skills, as they become insufficient. Crises are accompanied by a sense of suffering and disorganization, which on the one hand can lead to disorders and pathologies, but on the other hand can become an opportunity for development. A crisis is thus a bi-faceted phenomenon – it carries both a risk of destruction as well as chance to implement a constructive change in the life of an individual or the community.

It is the purpose of this paper to present psychological concepts that view a crisis as a occurrence which promotes development, a phenomenon which motivates to look for help and new, constructive solutions to deal with difficult situations.

2. Crisis according to psychological theories

The occurrence of crises involves both danger and opportunity (Gilliland, James, 2008). A person can deal with a crisis in various ways. The most constructive response to a crisis is to manage the crisis independently, effectively. After going through the crisis, a person becomes stronger, more compassionate, and richer in new experiences. Another reaction is to seemingly deal with the crisis while effectively blocking awareness of the wounding effects. The least constructive reaction to a crisis is a mental breakdown.

Crisis has a complex symptomatology and etiology. Both the symptoms and the causal factors of a crisis tend to vary widely. The factors which lead to a crisis include personal and environmental factors. The environment can either support or hinder crisis management. The most important factors which affect the occurrence and ability to cope with the crisis are: family, workplace, material status and membership in a social group. These have a direct impact on solving the problem and returning to stability.

An inherent characteristic of a crisis is anxiety. Often, it must grow to a high level in order for an individual to be ready to admit that the situation is out of control and very concrete actions must be taken to solve the problem which emerged. Unfortunately, there are no quick and ready solutions in crisis situations. This is especially true in situations where the crisis and tension has built up over a long period of time. Quick-acting methods, such as pharmaceuticals or drugs, bring temporary relief, but are not a solution to the crisis. On the contrary, an unresolved crisis grows and deepens.

Crises often entail various conflicts, which in turn involve the need to make decisions and choices (Bilczak, 2021; Jankelová et al., 2021; Rak et al., 2022; Grega, Nečas, 2022; Buzzanca et al., 2023). Passivity, being a lack of choice, also constitutes a choice, albeit usually a negative and destructive one.

Crisis is also characterized by universality and idiosyncrasy. Universality is deemed to mean that any crisis – at a universal or individual level – is accompanied by imbalance and disorganization. Idiosyncrasy, meanwhile, is understood as a certain subjective dimension of the crisis: the same situation can be perceived differently by different people, with one being able to deal with it on their own and with another being totally overwhelmed by it.

According to Lazarus, the factor which causes a crisis can be an event that poses a threat and leads to a disparity between the pressure of the environment and the opportunities for human development (Badura-Madej, 1999). At the psychological level, the crisis can manifest itself in a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, a feeling of inability to act and be active, a sense of loss of control over one's life, an inability to cope with daily responsibilities and social roles, a high level of anxiety and an increase in somatic symptoms. Objective manifestations of the crisis include the possibility to specify a critical event, the sudden and unexpected occurrence of a state of disequilibrium, the breakdown of previous behavioral patterns and a subjective sense of discomfort.

The crisis proceeds in a dynamic manner, and although it is difficult to distinguish clear phases, there have been attempts to systematize the course of the crisis. According to Caplan's theory, a crisis consists of the following stages:

1. Shock phase: tension which stimulates adaptive responses, corresponding to the alarm phase in stress;
2. The phase of increasing emotional tension and anxiety: this tension cannot be reduced due to the absence of adequate coping mechanisms;
3. Mobilization phase: further increase in tension leading to mobilization of external and internal emergency resources;
4. Phase of the crisis proper – decompensation (Czabała, Kluczyńska, 2021) .

As we can see, the proposed theoretical treatment of the various phases of a crisis presented above focuses on the elements of discomfort and suffering. Crises are accompanied by feelings of numbness, helplessness, shock, tension and even self-doubt.

Taking into consideration the length of the crisis and its cause, we can distinguish two types of crises: acute and chronic. In the case of an acute crisis, it is easy to identify the factor or event that caused it. Symptoms are greatly intensified and the course is very dynamic. A chronic crisis usually lasts much longer, symptoms can vary in intensity, there are periods of significant oversensitivity and sensitiveness to stimuli, and even a trivial event can trigger acute symptoms.

The aforementioned theories of crisis emphasize themes related to discomfort, disorganization and even suffering for an individual or a collective experiencing the crisis. Crisis is seen as a difficult phenomenon, associated with anxiety and loss of control, often leading to disorders and pathologies in various spheres of individual and social life. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that a crisis being a difficult process promotes development, and ultimately leads to a higher quality of life and the establishment of more functional patterns of behavior.

3. Crisis in developmental terms

The classic psychological concept that captures the crisis in developmental terms is the psychosocial development theory of E. Erikson. According to this theory, the source of crises are conflicts between the individual's current capabilities and emerging new demands from the environment. A positive resolution of a crisis makes it possible to achieve a new quality in a person's attitude towards themselves and the world, and thus to achieve a higher degree of development of one's personality.

According to Erikson's theory, each phase of development is linked with a specific crisis. Infancy, occurring up to 1 year of age, is associated with a crisis between trust and distrust. Overcoming this crisis leads to the achievement of a new value (virtue), which is hope. Thanks to it, the child is able to trust that the world is a safe place and that others care about the child's needs. Another developmental crisis which takes place during childhood (2 - 3 years of age) is the conflict between autonomy and shame. The child has a chance to learn to act independently and autonomously, and the value acquired as a consequence of overcoming the crisis is will. The period between 4 and 5 years of age involves a crisis between initiative and feelings of guilt. The child learns to take initiative while preserving their rights, and as a result achieves the virtue of entrepreneurship. School age between the ages of 6 and 12 is associated with a conflict between entrepreneurship and feelings of inferiority. If the child overcomes this crisis, they become competent, obtains self-confidence having refined important social and school skills. At the stage of adolescence: early adolescence – between 13 and 17 years of age, and late adolescence – between 17 and 22 years of age, there occurs a crisis between group identity and alienation and diffusion (dispersion) of roles. As a result of this crisis, one develops group identity and sense of belonging and discovers the roles that are the person fulfils. The value achieved is fidelity. The stage of early adulthood falling between the ages of 23 and 34 involves a crisis between intimacy and isolation. It consists in developing the ability to form strong friendships, experiencing a sense of love and community without feeling a loss of self-identity. Overcoming this crisis leads to achieving love. Middle adulthood (age 35 - 60) is a crisis between productivity and stagnation. The result is being productive in one's professional and family roles, and the virtue achieved takes the form of care. Late adulthood, i.e. the period above 61 years of age, involves a crisis between integrity and despair. The person reflects upon their past, and obtains wisdom as a consequence.

Another theory which emphasizes the developmental nature of the crisis is Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration (Dąbrowski, 1979). The author underlines the multilevel nature of man's psychological functioning and draws attention to developmental potential of individuals. Developmental potential is deemed to mean forms of over-excitability and developmental dynamisms. Forms of over-excitability are observable and independent of development, and concern such areas of human functioning as emotional, intellectual, imaginal, sensual or psychomotor spheres. Human development leads to maximizing the use of forms of over-excitability. Forms of over-excitability are the primary driving force of development, while dynamisms are the secondary force.

The author distinguishes five levels of human development:

1. Primary integration: the least diverse level, lack of developmental dynamism, rigidity, lack of reflexivity, lack of internal conflicts in favor of external conflicts with the environment;
2. Unilevel disintegration: internal breakdown, hesitation, doubts, relativity of values, internal conflicts arise in addition to external conflicts;
3. Spontaneous multilevel disintegration: existential anxiety, reflexivity, observing differences between the “actual self” and the “ideal self”, striving for self-development;
4. Directed multilevel disintegration: conscious development of one’s personality and internal hierarchy of values, autonomy, authenticity, responsibility, auto-therapy, self-control, striving for balance and integration;
5. Secondary integration: balance and internal synthesis, lack of internal conflicts, a person becomes the way they ought to and would like to be.

The positive disintegration theory depicts development as a process which is inextricably linked to crisis. Positive disintegration is a developmental process occurring through growing tension and disrupting the original stability and integration, which ultimately leads to a new, higher level of development. As Elżbieta Sujak writes, commenting on Dabrowski’s theory: *The impending crisis is a difficult moment, because it tasks a person with deciphering the sources of the growing anxiety, granting it a name, specifying what in their own behavior turns out to be unacceptable for the future, and then independently finding another version of behavior and effecting it regardless of the degree of difficulty. Only the next stage will be a process of gradual integration – i.e. harmonizing all other aspects of life and all the necessary efforts at the new stage.* (Sujak, 1997).

However, not every crisis leads to development. A developmental crisis is a phenomenon that occurs in the course of human development, caused by a conflict between actual capabilities and the demands of the environment, which results in a sudden change or a turnaround of one’s life.

Just as not every crisis promotes development, not every change in a person’s life constitutes a developmental change. A developmental change is irreversible and permanent (Przetacznik-Gierowska, Tyszkowa, 2011). The states or levels of internal organization which emerge as their result cannot be undone by way of unlearning them or otherwise reversed. A developmental change is also sequential, i.e. it leads to a universally ordered sequence of changes. Another characteristic of developmental change is autonomy, which means that it is specific to each subject undergoing development. A developmental change is also unidirectional: essentially progressive, although there may be moments of stasis (plateau) or regression. Finally, a developmental change is oriented towards a goal (end state).

How does a developmental change take place? Elżbieta Sujak distinguishes three forms of development: continuous development, leap development and crisis development (Sujak, 1997). Continuous development is the result of training and exercise, as a consequence of which a person acquires skills and abilities in a specific field. This form of development pertains to knowledge, behavioral patterns, memory skills or professional competence. It reaches its maximum point and then turns into a routine. The acquired skills no longer require effort or concentration, and are therefore performed automatically. Leap development relates to the area of morality and intellect. It entails transforming quantitative changes into qualitative ones and is conducted in terms of gaining insight and understanding of certain mechanisms and phenomena at a different, higher level. Crisis development is effected by means of the aforementioned developmental crises. It is the most difficult, but also the most conscious process of personal change. Developmental crisis, according to Sujak, constitutes *the accumulation of a characteristic uneasiness, being an anxiety directed towards the current self, the self which transpired to be unacceptable as the ultimate self, the self that requires a specific change in behavior, also involving, as a secondary factor, external consequences.* (Sujak, 1997).

4. Summary and conclusions

Having examined the selected psychological theories, we can infer that the element of hardship and effort is an intrinsic value of a crisis. Regardless of how the crisis was dealt with or whether it was resolved, an individual

or a group going through a crisis experiences anxiety and disintegration. Even the absence of decision-making or inaction does not wash away anxiety, but on the contrary, causes it to accumulate and deepen the crisis. Given that anxiety is an inherent part of a crisis, we should confront crisis situations and treat them as an opportunity to reach a higher level of development.

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