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Crisis Intervention: Returning People to Normal



The technique described here is directly derived from the Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) model. REBT, developed by the late Albert Ellis, Windy Dryden et. al., is an established and proven way of helping people who are suffering symptoms of depression, anxiety and other issues. One such novel derivative of REBT has been to use it on people who have been exposed to a catastrophe.

In a sense, it can be seen as an emotional “stitch in time.” If it is not delivered early enough, the open wound will have become a permanent scar. The mind will have found a method of coping, which involves burying the crisis and its effects beneath a layer of taboo. This layer of taboo is the mind’s defenses at work; originally intended as a survival mechanism to prevent unnecessary pain, it is now reducing ability by shutting off the memory and the subsequent learning process.

In the immediate post-crisis period, while the experience is still fresh in the mind, the victim will be willing and able to talk about it. After a few days the survivor will have learned to cope with not talking about it, this then makes it increasingly difficult for them to admit to themselves that something actually did happen. The mind’s automatic defense reaction is to pretend nothing happened and avoid contact with anything remotely associated with the event. The event becomes hidden away in the darkest recesses of the mind, where all the other apparently, or seemingly, un-confrontable items are dumped.

Restabilization: a post-crisis recovery process

I have chosen the term *Restabilization* to describe this particular technique in order to convey a sense of what it sets out to achieve. Also, it is a relatively friendly term from the prospective client's point of view. Whenever a group of people is in a position to benefit from Restabilization, they are likely to be fairly sensitive about receiving any form of treatment or therapy, where there may be an implication that they are mentally disturbed.

Restabilization is meant to imply a light, simple pick-me-up that will soon get people back to their normal, sensible selves without any social stigma or long-term dependence. Some people still do hesitate to jump in to any form of what might be regarded as mental treatment. To the casual observer, Restabilization may appear to be reminiscent of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing or CISD as it is commonly referred to. Readers already familiar with CISD may wish to visit Chapter 10 for a comparison.

After a severely traumatic event, people need to be Restabilized. The process I am suggesting is based on the theory of Crisis Intervention. There may be other ways of dealing with the symptoms but this process *does* work, has proved to be effective for many cases, and has no harmful side-effects.

Restabilization should be offered to *all* those who were aware of the crisis, or *trigger event*. Anyone who was linked to the place, the time, the people or the property of the trigger event will have been exposed to the after-effects. It should be made perfectly clear to all those who were exposed that it is completely normal for a person to be thrown off balance by a traumatic event.

The subject of Restabilization should be introduced at a meeting of all those concerned (see Chapter 6).

- *Everyone* should be offered the opportunity
- It should *not* be obligatory

Restabilization should be offered as early as practicable, because delay reduces the effectiveness of the process. A lengthy delay will render the technique completely ineffectual. If the trigger gets stale because of unavoidable delays, one would need to resort to a more highly focused technique, delivered by a qualified counselor.

Ideally, Restabilization should be offered shortly after the event by a skilled counselor, preferably practiced (or at least trained) in this technique. Crisis Intervention is a form of immediate help. It is the provision of help while help is still welcome, rather than offering sympathy after the need has worn off. Crisis Intervention is the counselor imposing control, with the client realizing that control is still possible. This demonstration restores clients' belief in control, and their ability to exercise control.

If a destabilized person is not
Restabilized quickly...
They will stabilize as an unstable,
Unable or unhappy person!

Further Help

Once the Restabilization process is complete, you will have helped the clients to get back on their feet, restored to the pre-crisis condition. It is also possible they may now feel even better than before, partly because they can compare the way they were beforehand and afterward. Additionally, it is possible the process did something rather more than a simple repair job and actually did make them better than they were before by providing insights.

Because the process has worked and was effective over a relatively short time span, you will have demonstrated to them that they can be helped, they can make progress to overcome effects of traumatic stress. Consequently they may want to try the benefit of more of the same, or something similar.

If they are prepared to consider additional counseling to gain more benefit, we should do what we can to help them with their desire to make further progress. The results of group members seeking further progress and personal growth are also a benefit to all those around them, both at home and at work: something not just socially acceptable but indeed desirable.

Check with the client that they feel OK to ask for more help either now or in the future before you finally send them out to face the world on their own.

The Restabilization Process

There are four basic recovery stages involved in the Restabilization technique, although for a complete understanding of the client's perspective it is necessary to take into account the preceding traumatizing or Trigger Event. The introduction of the counselor (Stage 1) is the effective beginning of the technique, assuming that the counselor is called in as a result of the original crisis. Where it is possible to spot the event before it happens, an entirely different approach might be required. Prevention is much better than cure (see Fig. 2-1, *The 4 Restabilization Stages* on p. 15).

Cognitive Analysis is a standard technique¹ for getting clients to develop understanding of their behavior or reactions and to realize that there is a better solution. By identifying a preferred behavior pattern for themselves, they are more able to cope with such a

¹ As used in Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) practices.

situation in the future, thus they can face the outlook with much more confidence. Restabilization takes this approach a step further and gets the client to rehearse and practice the improved behavior pattern to reinforce and stabilize the benefit. Therefore, clients can gain long term permanent benefits rather than mere temporary relief.

The 4 Restabilization Stages

TRIGGER EVENT		A crisis occurs...
1	RECAP	Set up for Cognitive Analysis
2	REVIEW*	Cognition = understanding the effect(s)
3	REPAIR*	Analysis = better solutions
4	REINFORCE	Recommend & reinforce new solutions

Fig. 2-1: The 4 Restabilization Stages

*Steps 2 & 3 are known as Cognitive Analysis

Fig. 2-2, *Restabilization – An Overview* (see p. 16) is a skeleton that shows how the various session elements fit together and how the overall Restabilization process works.

Restabilization – An Overview

STAGE	QUESTIONS	SESSION GOALS
CRISIS EVENT		
Stage 1		
RECAP	What happened? How is this event bothering you?	Behavioral description of the event itself and any subsequent reactions.
Stage 2		
REVIEW	Did you anger or upset yourself? How?	Indication of inappropriate thinking relating to the event (realizing the current solution is self-defeating)
Stage 3		
Cognitive Analysis		
REPAIR	What else could you have done to avoid, short circuit or change the solution?	Identification of fresh solutions on 3 levels: A) New Thoughts; B) Identification of new feelings and statements; C) Alternative behavior(s).
Stage 4		
REINFORCE	How do you feel now? How would you solve the problem now? What will you do next time?	Recommendations and the reinforcement of the new feelings and solutions. Practice the new behavior pattern.

Fig. 2-2: Restabilization Overview

Breakthroughs

The Damage of Doubt

“Cynthia” was a highly qualified and experienced trainer who had been successful for a number of years. Apparently her nervousness had driven her to become very knowledgeable about her subject. The ability to answer any obscure question posed by her students gave her a degree of confidence, which enabled her to assume the identity of a competent teacher. She knew her subject and her lessons were carefully prepared; nothing was left to chance. Her competence, and the confidence it generated, were painstakingly constructed but fragile.

During her early thirties she took a break to start a family. When she returned to work as a trainer a year later, she had the misfortune to meet Derek, a rather overbearing student. This student complained about her attention to detail. Derek said he felt her teaching material was over the top and her style was too wordy. Although Cynthia had used the same material successfully for many years, she amended the materials and modified her style of teaching as a result of this criticism.

Over the next couple of training sessions, she received relatively poor feedback, which caused her to experience severe self-doubt.

During the first Recap session she suddenly realized what she had done: “I’ve allowed that young so-and-so to destroy my perfectly good way of teaching the subject. I was stupid enough to go into self-destruct mode. Actually I was a very good teacher, and I still am if I stick to my original ways which I worked so hard to develop. Thank you for listening. You’ve given me back the strength to go back and show off my enthusiasm and knowledge of the subject.”

We went through the motions of the rest of the process but her recovery was essentially founded on that one moment of realization.

The Importance of Words

John, a previously bright and successful student became mediocre when he changed to another school. He seemed to experience the most difficulty with mathematics, which had previously been his forte. His mother thought it was strange for him to be struggling with the most logical of subjects where a keen brain should be a distinct advantage.

During the review session, the young man identified a phenomenon, which may have been at the root of some of his difficulties. His new math teacher appeared to be working from a different source of reference. As he said: "This man appears to be using a different language; there are moments when I just don't understand what he is trying to say. Then it takes me a while to catch up with what is going on. I keep finding myself struggling with the subject I used to thoroughly enjoy. If only I could see what he means."

The clue was in the reference to language. During the repair session that followed soon afterward, John came to the conclusion that he might have misunderstood some of the words his teacher had been using. It was possible these words had a special meaning in that context or simply they were unfamiliar. Our young student decided he should get hold of a technical dictionary and check out the meanings of the words which his new teacher was using in connection with mathematics. He was happy to believe that language skills had let him down rather than an inability to deal with the logic of mathematics. Over the next few days he pored over a pile of textbooks and dictionaries.

When he returned for the final reinforcement session, he proudly declared that the problem had more or

less vanished when he checked out some of the basic mathematical terms. “Suddenly it all became clear. One moment I was having a hard time reading through a math textbook and a couple of minutes later it all began to flow and I could flip through the pages. I realized I didn’t recognize a couple of words, so I looked them up in the two dictionaries I was using and Bingo! I think I’ll start using a dictionary to help me with my English lessons.”

A couple of months later, his mother reported that he was doing well at school and had even written a few poems to demonstrate his new-found command of, and enthusiasm for, the English language.