Dealing with Crisis
What is a Crisis

Stress is a part of our daily lives as we go about our normal tasks but when it becomes so much that we feel that we cannot cope, it constitutes a crisis. Such a situation can be at home or at work or in any sphere of our lives and can be triggered off by innumerable factors. However, it is important to remember that whatever may be the external circumstance the essential crisis is always within us. As the Mother remarks:

People think that their condition depends on circumstances. But that is all false. If somebody is a ‘nervous wreck’, he thinks that if circumstances are favorable he will improve. But, actually, even if they are favorable he will remain what he is…it is not the circumstances that have to be changed: what is required is an inner change.

We must, however, not also be harsh on ourselves when we are in a crisis mode because it is human to breakdown sometimes and to feel that it is the end of the world. Emotional and psychological crises are peculiar to human beings alone in the entire creation. Why do they happen? The Mother explains:

It is obvious that what especially characterizes man is this mental capacity of watching himself live. The animal lives spontaneously, automatically, and if it watches itself live, it must be to a very minute and insignificant degree, and that is why it is peaceful and does not worry. Even if an animal is suffering because of an accident or an illness, this suffering is reduced to a minimum by the fact that it does not observe it, does not project it in its consciousness and into the future, does not imagine things about its illness or its accident.

With man there has begun this perpetual worrying about what is going to happen, and this worry is the principal, if not the sole cause of his torment. With this objectivising consciousness there has begun anxiety, painful imaginations, worry, torment, anticipation of future catastrophes, with the result most men—and not the least conscious, the most conscious—live in perpetual torment. Man is too conscious to be indifferent, he is not conscious enough to know what will happen….

How can a problem be solved when one doesn’t have the necessary knowledge? And the unfortunate thing is that man believes that he has to resolve all the problems of his life, and he does not have the knowledge needed to do it. That is the source, the origin of all his troubles—that perpetual question, ‘What should I do?’ which is followed by another one still more acute, ‘What is going to happen?’ and at the same time, more or less, the inability to answer.

How does a crisis get triggered of? We ourselves can do it or it may be people who are close to us like our parents, siblings and friends that may do it knowingly or unknowingly. There may be outsiders whose opinion we value or who may be important to us. They too can cause us undue stress. Also, certain circumstances make us more susceptible to stress. High-pressure jobs or chronic ill health makes us vulnerable. Social, financial, professional or family problems can cause emotional disturbances of crisis proportions. But we have to remember that ‘failure’ or a sense of inadequacy is a part of human existence and not something to fall down upon:

What hand and brain went ever paired?
What heart alike conceived and dared?
Responses to Crises

Our responses to crisis situations manifest themselves as depression, anxiety or extreme stress. Often we do not even realize that we are depressed. However, some signs should alert us as to where we are heading. We may be feeling unnecessarily sad, or ‘blue’ and empty. We may be anxious, agitated, restless, and irritable or cry for no reason at all. We may have eating disorders like loss of appetite or binging leading to inordinate weight loss or gain. We may either be completely unable to sleep or sleep for long periods of time. There may be a feeling of fatigue or loss of energy and ennui when we find ourselves unable to do anything at all. We may lose interest or pleasure in our usual activities. We may find it difficult to maintain normal relationships with others or withdraw socially into a shell. Thoughts of suicide or death may cross our minds. In moments of such despair we either withdraw completely into a shell or desperately look for a person with whom we can share our pain and suffering. Some seek professional help but usually in our society, people hesitate to share their psychological problems and have them treated.

Why does all this happen? Is it really people and things outside of us or is it something within? The Mother explains:

…one is almost constantly in an ordinary vital state where the least unpleasant thing very spontaneously and easily brings you depression—depression if you are a weak person, revolt if you a strong one. Every desire which is not satisfied, every impulse which meets an obstacle, every unpleasant contact with outside things, very easily and very spontaneously creates depression or revolt…

This is not to belittle genuine difficulties and difficult circumstances but to become aware of our response to them; is it positive or negative because on that will depend whether we survive or succumb.

The problem is not just of stress as stress is a normal part of living and useful in many ways. It motivates us to study or work. It may increase our alertness and productivity but excess of it interferes in our ability to think, to remember and to focus on our tasks. An ineffective management of stress can result in even physical illness.

Stress can be produced by both normal and unusual events, by both positive and negative occurrences. Failure in examination, breakdown of a relationship, divorce, illness and other such negative events can produce a high degree of stress leading to emotional crisis. But even positive occurrences can cause stress. Students are often very stressed out at the end of their formal education then the idea of being pitched into the workforce stares them in the face giving rise to feelings of insecurity, lack of self worth, and fear of competition.

Crisis situations also cause high levels of anxiety. Anxiety is a feeling of unease, apprehension. Or tension that we feel in the face of a real or perceived threat. If it is not properly taken care of, it creates panic and in the extreme, may require treatment. in a state of anxiety, we
become unduly apprehensive, restless, irritable, and fearful. We may get panic attacks for no
reason at all or have trouble sleeping. There may be physical manifestations like a dry mouth or
throat, nausea and vomiting, stomach upset, palpitations, perspiration and others.

**Dealing with Crisis**

The question arises what to do when we are in a state of crisis. The first thing is to
recognize and be aware that we are undergoing an emotional or psychological crisis. Often that
is the hardest. The next most difficult part is to seek help whether of one’s own self or of
another. The other may or may not be a professional. It may be a friend, a guru or a teacher, any
person whom we trust and with whom we can share both our joys and sorrows. What we have to
prevent is that we should not allow ourselves to slip into unhealthy ways of dealing with stress
like excessive alcohol or unwise eating.

Also, while sharing our pain is very helpful, we have to understand that ultimately our
resources to overcome a situation come essentially from within. The others can only help but we
should never discount our ability to walk alone. We have to remind ourselves that this is not the
first time that we have encountered difficulties. There have been crises in the past and we have
managed to put ourselves together again. If life has been rebuilt before, we must never lose faith
that it can be done again. Also, things can become as amazingly right as they can go unexpectedly wrong.

**Relaxation of the Mind**

One of the best methods of dealing with stress is to try and relax our minds. Napoleon is
supposed to have said that he would want only that person as his General who could sit down ad
have a smoke when he was losing the battle. There are different methods that we can adopt to
relax. Physical exercise releases psychological stress and releases energy. Any physical activity
is therapeutic at a time like this. It may be physical work at home, like cleaning of cupboards or
dusting and sweeping. Or, it may be a long walk or exercise which is also a great stress buster. It
prevents us from unhealthy brooding and generates energy which is life preserving. As the
Mother says: “Unless you work hard you do not get energy; because in that case you do not need
it and don’t deserve it.” Also, “A good material work not exceeding normal capacities is most
useful in keeping a good physical and moral poise.”

**Caring for Ourselves**

Another important thing is to make a deliberate effort to take care of our own selves. If
we don’t love ourselves, who else will? If we don’t respect ourselves, how can we expect others
to do so? If we can’t live peacefully with our own selves, how can other? Part of loving
ourselves is to take care of us, that is, to ensure that we eat proper meals, sleep the necessary
amount and be good to ourselves. Also, we have to learn to forgive our own faults or the
mistakes that we might have made. We are often too harsh to ourselves and forget that everyone
has faults and that everyone makes mistakes at some time or another. We all make wrong
decisions at times or hurt others. We are all human beings liable to err but we all need love and
care. We don’t have to be perfect.

**Detachment**
A good way of finding a solution to a problem that is disturbing us is to detach ourselves from it. It is to have the attitude of being both a doer and a witness to our own actions. As Sri Aurobindo explains:

Detachment is the beginning of mastery, but for complete there should be no reactions at all. When there is something within undisturbed by the reactions that means the inner being is free and master of itself, but it is not yet master of the whole nature. When it is master, it allows no wrong reactions---if any come they are at once repelled and shaken off, and finally none come at all.

But for such an attitude to develop we have to become self aware, develop the capacity to look dispassionately at all the movements within and then to measure them from an impartial and objective standpoint without allowing our own preferences to interfere. It is not easy but without it our perceptions cannot be wholly true and without true perceptions, solutions cannot be found. As the Mother says:

It is only by observing these movements (of our being) with great care, by bringing them, as it were, before the tribunal of our highest ideal, with a sincere will to submit to its judgment, that we can hope to educate in us a discernment which does not err.

One good way to create this self-awareness is to keep a record of one’s feelings. This is best done though a self-reflective journal. It helps to write as this objectifies what we feel. It is also a stepping back mechanism that helps us to get a proper perspective. If we look back over a period of time at what we have written, we begin to discern a pattern in our responses to different situations and persons and make the required change in ourselves to deal with the situation. It also helps us to realize that pain has come to us before, that a solution has been found and so it will be found again. As Sri Aurobindo points out, it is only our “tamasic ego”

Which accepts and supports despondency, weakness, inertia, self-depreciation, unwillingness to act, unwillingness to know or be open, fatigue, indolence, do-nothingness. Contrary to the rajasic it says, “I am so weak, so obscure, so miserable, so oppressed and ill-used—there is no hope for me, no success, I am denied everything, am unsupported, how can I do this, how can I do that, I have no power for it, no capacity, I am helpless; let me die; let me lie still and moan.”

Meditation

When a crisis comes, the most important thing is to relax our minds so that we can center ourselves and develop a quietness and silence without which no solution is possible. A good way to achieve this silence is through meditation. What is meditation? How does it help? And what is the process of meditating? Sri Aurobindo explains that:

There are two words used in English to express the India idea of dhyana, “meditation” and “contemplation”. Meditation means properly the concentration of the mind on a single train of ideas which work out a single subject. Contemplation means regarding mentally a single object, image, idea so that the knowledge about the object, image or idea may arise naturally in the mind by force of the concentration. Both these things are forms of dhyana, for the principle of dhyana is mental concentration whether in thought, vision or knowledge.

There are other forms of dhyana. There is a passage in which Vivekananda advises you to stand back from your thoughts, let them occur in your mind as they will and simply observe them and see what they are. This may be called concentration in self-observation.
This form leads to another, the emptying of all thought out of the mind so as to leave it a sort of pure vigilant blank on which the divine knowledge may come and imprint itself, undisturbed by the inferior thoughts of the ordinary human mind and with the clearness of a writing in white chalk on a blackboard. You will find that the Gita speaks of this rejection of all mental thought as one of the methods of yoga and even the method it seems to prefer. This may be called the dhyana of liberation, as it frees the mind from slavery to the mechanical process of thinking and allows it to thin or not to think, as it pleases and when it pleases, or to choose its own thoughts or else to go beyond thought to the pure perception of Truth called in our philosophy Vinjana.

Meditation is the easiest process for the human mind, but the narrowest in its results; contemplation more difficult, but greater; self-observation and liberation from the chains of Thought the most difficult of all, but the widest and greatest in its fruits. Once can choose any of them according to one’s bent and capacity. The perfect method is to use them all, each in its own place and for its own object; He goes on to tell us that there are no essential external conditions, but solitude and seclusion at the time of meditation as well as stillness of the body are helpful, sometimes almost necessary to the beginner. But one should not be bound by external conditions. Once the habit of meditation is formed, it should be made possible to do it in all circumstances, lying, sitting, walking, alone, in company, in silence or in the midst of noise etc.

The first internal condition necessary is concentration of the will against the obstacles to meditation, i.e. wandering of the mind, forgetfulness, sleep, physical and nervous impatience and restlessness etc.

The second is an increasing purity and calm of the inner consciousness (citta) out of which thought and emotion arise, i.e. a freedom from all disturbing reactions, such as anger, grief, depression, anxiety about worldly happenings etc. mental perfection and moral are always closely allied to each other.

Acceptance
Further, we have to accept that not every problem has a solution that can be found immediately. Often it is best to let go. It sound like escapism but sometimes it is the only way as time alone can solve a particular problem. There is a time to plunge into things and there is a time to walk away. There are situations that can’t be resolved without someone getting seriously hurt—it may be we or another—and at such a time escape may be the only solution even if it is only a temporary one. However, at the same time, running away from a situation cannot become a habit otherwise it can backfire and cause serious harm. So we have to honestly test whether we have tried our best or is escape our first response. It is only when we have done all that we could that we can step back and let events take their course.

Moreover, there is nothing static in life. Sometimes a solution comes because as time goes by, our desires themselves change. What seemed absolutely essential becomes supremely irrelevant. For example, we may have set our hearts upon a particular job and if we don’t get it, the disappointment is huge. But, as we look back, we are often amazed as to why it had seemed
so important to us. So, every time we feel that all is lost, we have to remind ourselves that it is not quite true. As Browning’s rejected lover points out,  

   Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
   Why, all men strive and who succeeds?…
   All labour, yet no less
   Bear up beneath their unsucceess,
   Look at the end of work, contrast
   They petty done, the undone vast,
   This present of theirs with the hopeful past!

Also, what we desire for ourselves may not truly be the best for us. A simple example may suffice. We may be very sure that we have to take a particular flight and reach a destination because of something urgent that we may need to do there. Not getting that plane would result in a huge loss. However, although we may be very disappointed not to get the ticket for it and worry about the outcome of our absence but that flight might meet with an accident or get delayed and the purpose of our travel may be lost. Browning’s protagonist in “The Last Ride Together”, sure that he is going to lose his beloved asks himself philosophically,

   Who knows what’s fit for us? Had fate
   Proposed bliss here should sublimate
   My being—had I signed the bond—
   Still one must lead some life beyond,
   Have a bliss to die with, dim-descrried,
   This foot once planted on the goal,
   This glory-garland round my soul,
   Could I descry such? Try and test!
   I sink back shuddering from the quest,
   Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?

As he goes on his last ride together with his beloved, he does not lose hope for he takes heart from the thought “Who knows but the world may end tonight?” of course this can be construed as false optimism of the desperate but is also the ability to live fully in the moment and to savour it completely. If that moment could be held, it would become immortal:

   What if we still ride on, we two
   With life for ever old yet new,
   Changed not in kind but in degree,
   The instant made eternity,--

This is to accept life completely whatever it may bring us as it is the divine will that knows best. It is to strive, to seek and to conquer but with the fruits of action left to the Divine. It is Arjuna’s action with detachment and with total surrender to Krishna. It is to have faith because it is that which nurtures, sustains and guides.

Faith

The key in most cases, therefore, is really faith but not the faith of the weak and slothful but that of the courageous and the strong. It encompasses within it a purpose in life, hope that things will be all right and the patience and serenity to accept that we can only do our best but
that nothing can be solved overnight:

Faith is the soul’s witness to something not yet manifested, achieved or realized, but which yet the Knower within us, even in the absence of all indications, feels to be true or supremely worth following or achieving. This thing within us can last even when there is no fixed belief in the mind, even when the vital struggles and revolts and refuses. Therefore, even when everything seems hopeless, it is our faith that the divine has sent this situation to us for our own growth and enrichment helps us to provide a meaning and purpose to the stressful situation that we find ourselves in and which we have to endure. It gives us hope and helps us to surrender to the higher will without which nothing is possible it also provides the assurance that nothing lasts forever, whether good or bad. Perhaps the wisest saying in the world is “This too shall pass.” It is just that we forget and despair.

Ibid., pp. 94-95.
A Practical Guide to Integral Yoga: Extracts Compiled from the Writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, Pondicherry:Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998, p. 120.
Ibid., p. 119.
Ibid., p. 126.
A.S.Dalal, Psychology Mental Health and Yoga, p. 112.
Ibid., pp.86-87.
Robert Browning, “The Last Ride Together.”
Ibid.
Ibid.