

Scott Fraser provides kind, encouraging, and inspiring insight into the challenges of both psychotherapy and the essence of crisis intervention. Dr. Fraser's relatable book is highly readable and practical. It is an evidence-based yet efficient approach to treatment. The book is a new, more efficient approach to professional assistance. It's both helpful systematically and in practice guidelines, such as his process of change model. Highly recommended.

—**Charles R. Figley, PhD**, Kurzweg Chair in Disaster Mental Health and School of Social Work, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA

Drawing on his extensive experience, Scott Fraser rewards us with an innovative and far-reaching orientation to crisis. Fraser poses a striking challenge to common sense responses to crises and provides rich illustrations of his counter-intuitive view in action. A useful and deeply engaging work.

—**Kenneth J. Gergen, PhD**, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA

In his highly innovative volume, J. Scott Fraser offers a fresh, process-based approach to crisis intervention. His focus on tipping points, those critical moments of decision and change, aligns closely with what we know about the role of context, flexibility, and values in creating long-lasting change. This book invites practitioners to step into the dynamic flow of crises, not just to resolve them, but to use them as catalysts for growth. Fraser's work speaks to anyone willing to see crises as precious windows of opportunity and is a necessary read for practitioners wishing to deepen their work when everything is on the line.

—**Steven C. Hayes, PhD**, Foundation Professor Emeritus, University of Nevada, Reno, and originator of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)

The tipping point interventions and the process of change model presented in this book are inspiring ways to work with people in crisis situations for optimal outcomes. This book is a must-read for professionals who work with clients in crisis situations and want a new way forward.

—**Toni Zimmerman, PhD, LMFT**, Professor, Human Development and Family Studies Department, and Program Director for the Marriage and Family Therapy Graduate Program, Colorado State University, Fort Collins

Scott Fraser's *Crisis Intervention* fills a much-needed gap in the psychotherapy literature. Much of that work is grounded in the presumption that clinicians must slowly and methodically assess and plan, yet much of clinical practice requires great urgency. Fraser offers a new vision of how to proceed in the context of crisis, centered in an overarching process of change model that includes a systemic vision that extends beyond the individual, and a view in which crisis is not equated with disaster but as presenting opportunities for fundamental change. Well written and filled with illustrative examples, Fraser is a skillful clinician who has worked for years in this context. I highly recommend this book to all practicing mental health professionals, and this should be essential reading for all students in training to be psychotherapists.

—**Jay Lebow, PhD**, Clinical Professor and Senior Scholar, The Family Institute at Northwestern and Northwestern University, Evanston, IL

This book masterfully extends the seminal MRI brief therapy model to the arena of crisis intervention. Drawing on systemic and social constructivist ideas, Scott Fraser shows how crises such as trauma, suicidality, grief, domestic violence, and sexual assault present windows of opportunity for clinicians to tip vicious cycles of problem maintenance in new and positive directions through strategic, often counterintuitive intervention.

—**Michael J. Rohrbaugh, PhD**, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, University of Arizona, Tucson

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Tipping Point Interventions and the Process of Change*

This book aims to revise the traditional notion of crisis and how to do crisis intervention and brief therapy. Most practitioners across helping disciplines have been taught to assess danger and reduce risks. This book will explain how to seize the opportunity of crises and tip them toward rapid resolution. It will help readers view crises as time-limited windows of opportunity to move all the people involved in new and positive directions in their lives. It will teach a viewpoint and model for understanding crises in their context, engaging with all involved using their values, culture, and language, honoring their goals, and changing vicious cycles into virtuous ones. It will also show how different types of crises nonetheless reflect similar vicious cycles, and how each of those vicious cycles can be successfully tipped toward resolution by embracing what we refer to as the *process of change model of crisis and crisis intervention*. While this perspective can often seem complex and different from our everyday views of our world, perhaps a few different crisis examples along with their intervention strategies will help.

Consider the following cases: A therapist agrees with his suicidal patient that from his client's view, life does seem hopeless, and he can see why his

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by J. S. Fraser

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client wants to die. Another therapist counsels her client after a recent beating by her husband and warns her that leaving is a dangerous moment and should be undertaken with care. Another client trying to recover from a traumatic event is coached to relive that event in detail while writing it down. A grieving spouse returns with her therapist to the favorite place she and her husband would go for breakfast and talks to her therapist about him there. These interventions are counterintuitive in some ways, yet each was successful.

Now contrast those cases with these: Another client died feeling despondent and isolated despite their therapist and family insisting that life was worth living. Another woman, at the urging of her friends, left her husband and was killed by him shortly after leaving. In another instance, a rape survivor continued to have flashbacks of the attack despite her efforts to put it out of her mind. Still another woman found herself grieving years after the death of her partner, despite her efforts to stay busy. These examples represent failures of logical reactions to crises; these responses made sense, yet they made things worse. These two sets of cases are opposites of each other. We will make sense of this in Chapters 1 and 2 of this volume.

As we move forward, we will discuss how people are drawn into a crisis and typically resort to logical, tried-and-true responses to resolve them. Sometimes they do end up resolving them as, by definition, those responses have been useful in the past. However, at other times, those very solutions that have always been helpful only serve to make things worse, as they did in the second set of examples. In the first case examples, these clients reversed their solution patterns around their crises by doing something very different from or even opposite of their former solution patterns and thus began the process of change and resolution.

In the next few chapters, we will see that crises often evolve from what may appear to be a minor shift in the way things have always been—or potential tipping points. Then, depending on how that shift is interpreted and subsequently acted upon, clients may spiral into a vicious cycle, often ending in disaster, continued suffering, or loss of life. And, as in the first seemingly counterintuitive case interventions just described, effective crisis interventions frequently involve stepping out of an initial mindset and typical responses to try powerfully effective yet often paradoxical solutions when seen from the original points of view. Crises may also occur at different levels of systems yet follow the same process.

Consider, for example, the events in Mann Gulch, Montana, in 1949, described next. A disaster evolved from a small, seemingly harmless fire to a major conflagration that threatened smokejumpers' lives, and then to an

ingenious solution, which was not followed by others because it was so opposite of what they had always known to do.

A forest fire which seemed harmless at first was waiting to explode. A team of fifteen smokejumpers parachuted in to contain the fire, but soon they were running for their lives, racing to the top of a steep ridge. Their foreman, Wag Dodge, recognized that they would not make it, and had his men drop their tools and run up the hill.

With the fire barely two hundred yards behind him, he did a strange and marvelous thing. He invented a solution. His crew must have thought he had gone crazy as he took some matches out of his pocket, bent down and set fire to the grass directly in front of him. The fire spread quickly uphill, and he stepped into the middle of the newly burnt area, calling for his crew to run back into his newly set fire and join him in the now burned area behind it which wouldn't burn as the fire would have no fuel and leap over it.

But nobody followed Wag Dodge. They ignored him, clinging to what they had been taught, and they ran right by the answer. The fire raged past Wag Dodge and overtook the crew, killing thirteen men and burning 3,200 acres. Dodge survived, nearly unharmed. (Berwick, 2002)

Wag Dodge's solution was counterintuitive from the perspective of his team. As in the first set of cases at the start of this chapter, Dodge's crisis resolution stepped out of the assumptions, definitions, and consequent reactions of how to respond to wildfires at that time. Since then, setting escape fires of the kind Wag Dodge used has become standard procedure for fire jumpers. Eventually another seemingly paradoxical policy change directed firefighters to let many fires to burn instead of putting them all out. The idea is to allow the fires to clear brush that might eventually ignite an even larger fire—in essence allowing forest fires to burn to prevent future forest fires. This was the same process of crisis pattern development, reversal, and resolution as in the first set of cases described earlier in this chapter. As I will explain, the process of crises evolution and resolution is the same across different types of crises, including often counterintuitive pattern shifts from initial vicious cycles.

Now consider this Japanese folktale:

A Japanese coastal village was once threatened by a tidal wave, but the wave was sighted in advance, far out on the horizon, by a lone farmer in the rice fields on the hillside above the village. At once he set fire to the fields, and the villagers who came swarming up to save their crops were saved from the flood. (de Shazer, 1991; Fraser, 1995a)

Once more, an effective solution to an impending disaster was counterintuitive. In this case, a small trigger of setting a fire on the hill saved the villagers. There was no time to explain the villagers' impending drowning in a tsunami. The farmer on the hill relied on the villagers' interpretation of the crisis as the potential loss of their crops to the fire to draw them up the hill and to

safety. The villagers' interpretation of their situation, the way they viewed the potential loss of their crops, triggered their rush up the hill. Running to higher ground saved them from the coming tsunami, yet they took that action for a different purpose. In this folktale, as in all cases, what is viewed as a crisis, and what type of crisis, is based on the culture, language, and traditions of those involved and their context as they see it. In this case, the lone farmer understood the villagers' fear of both losing their crops and losing their lives to drowning in a tsunami. What would have made most sense in this situation would have been for him to run down from the hillside to warn the villagers. Yet there was no time. All would have been drowned in the tsunami, including him. At that tipping point, the farmer instead thought quickly and creatively and took the paradoxical and counterintuitive action of setting the rice fields on fire. His quick, ingenious solution within his cultural context embraced this tipping point and saved the villagers. As we will see, such small and often counterintuitive shifts from what makes sense are often the hallmark of successful crisis resolution.

Similarly, in the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946), the angel, Clarence Odbody, saved the main character, George Bailey, from jumping off a bridge to kill himself—by himself jumping off that bridge. Just as we will advocate for all crisis intervention practitioners to do, Clarence aligned himself with George's lifelong value of helping others. In doing so, he prevented George from dying by suicide, instead prompting him to jump off the bridge and into the swirling cold water to save Clarence rather than to end his own life.

Each of these examples shows the first key to understanding the process-based view on how crises develop and how they are often resolved. That is, crises are invariably vicious cycle patterns of well-intentioned attempts to solve or ameliorate a perceived challenging situation. Such repeated solutions are shaped by the norms, language, culture, and experiences of what has typically worked and is appropriate. Such solutions are often seen as tried-and-true because they have usually worked in the past. However, when they falter in urgent and potentially risky situations, these rigidly repeated solutions only serve to escalate and exacerbate the ongoing crisis. These crises are often triggered by a relatively minor perceived shift in normal life. The more those involved see risk, danger, and urgency evident in such situations, the more intensely the solutions will be applied and repeated. Doing anything different in such urgent situations is seen as very risky in itself. Yet, as we will see, such counterintuitive actions are quite often the key to crisis resolution. Aligning with the values, worldview, and language and agreeing on goals, new frames, and actions that make sense of the previously counterintuitive solutions is at the core of the process of change model we will advocate in this book. We



will have much more to say about aligning with our clients' values and world-views to help them interdict the vicious cycles of their crises as we discuss the process of change approach to crisis intervention in Chapter 3, but there are a few more perspectives on crises to address first.

## CRISES ARE RELATIVE

Crises are always relative to the view of those experiencing them. Some people's crises may be another group's salvation. The following example also shows how one seemingly small event often triggers a cascade of events for better or worse, depending on one's perspective. While this example is still another context for a crisis event and at a larger scale, the same process holds for how virtuous and vicious cycles evolve.

Consider these events: On November 6, 2014, the *New York Times* published an op-ed article with the headline, "How the Fall of the Berlin Wall Really Happened" (Sarotte, 2014). It recounted the events and interactions that led to the opening of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9, 1989, as a sequence of interchanges that led to cascading events that no one might have ever predicted. Excerpts from this article paint the picture this way:

In truth, the opening of the Berlin Wall on the night of Nov. 9, 1989, was not planned. Well into that year, East Germany remained nearly inescapable: The last killing by a guard at the wall occurred in February 1989; the last shooting, a very near miss, in April; the last death during an escape attempt on the larger East German border, only 10 days earlier. . . . However, in response to some political climate changes, Politburo members in East Berlin decided to make minor changes to the state's draconian travel rules—but to retain their power to deny travel permission on a whim.

The announcement of this pseudo-reform, at an international news conference televised on the night of Nov. 9, was botched. The bumbling Politburo member running the conference, Günter Schabowski, read the news release for the first time on air. Much of his reading was garbled, but a few phrases popped out: trips abroad would be "possible for every citizen," starting "right away, immediately." Shorn of their context, these phrases mistakenly gave journalists and TV viewers the impression that the wall was open. . . . And so, when tens of thousands of Berliners headed toward the wall in the minutes after the news conference, the entire system cracked.

When one of the regime's most loyal subordinates, a Stasi officer named Harald Jäger who was working the Nov. 9 night shift at a crucial checkpoint in the Berlin Wall, repeatedly phoned his superiors with accurate reports of swelling crowds, they did not trust or believe him. They called him a delusional coward. Insulted, furious and frightened, he decided to let the crowds out, starting a chain reaction that swept across all of the checkpoints that night. (Sarotte, 2014; see also Fraser, 2018, pp. 68–69)

One seemingly random miscommunication produced a cascade of interactions and decisions that spiraled into what turned out to be a historic change of events. From the perspective of the East German government, this was likely seen as a catastrophic crisis or error. From the view of the East German people who wanted to leave, this was their liberation. Whether a pattern is viewed as a vicious or virtuous cycle is always a product of the observer.

## **CRISES OFTEN RESOLVE BY REFRAMING THEM**

Finally, consider the case of John:

John had gone to the outdoor rock concert with a set of friends, not knowing they had brought along some brownies with marijuana baked into them. His date that day had also brought some sugar cubes with LSD in them. After eating the brownies and a sugar cube, John had to be taken to the concert infirmary. He thought he was going insane. His friends assured him that his reactions were to the drugs and apologized, but the terrible, frightening event continued to play out for John over the next year. Whenever he was in an uncertain situation, or one requiring him to be clearheaded and articulate, he found himself having racing thoughts, a pounding heart, tingling in his hands, and a need to sit down before passing out from hyperventilation. Each time, the more he tried to calm himself down, the more out of control he seemed to become. It wasn't until John went to the university's health service and learned about the physical bases of a panic attack that his troubles went away. (Fraser, 2018, pp. 67–68)

In this case, a classic cascade of successive crises or panic attacks was initiated by one event. The succeeding crises, however, far outlived the drugs originally in John's system that triggered the vicious cycles. His solutions—his hyper-vigilance and his attempts to calm himself—became the problem. Finally, a relatively minor new bit of information stopped the pattern. John accepted that there was nothing to solve, and by accepting the distress, it went away. This is one more example of the process that inevitably characterizes most all crises. Crises are typically sustained and exacerbated by the solutions aimed at resolving them, and they are most often resolved by simple redirection of those patterns.

## **THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK**

This book is divided into two parts, with Part I laying out the foundation of a process view of change, the evolution of crises, and the process of change model of crisis intervention and brief therapy. Part II traces effective

interventions across a range of different crises and drives home how they all fit with the process of change model.

### **Part I: Crisis, Chaos, Catastrophe, and the Process of Change**

The four chapters in Part I address the foundation of a process of change view on crises and crisis intervention. Chapter 1 lays out the problems of the traditional approaches to crisis intervention. Chapter 2 presents the theory and research that are the foundations of the process view. Chapter 3 covers the *viewing* of crises from the process view. Finally, Chapter 4 presents guidelines for the *doing* of crisis intervention from the process of change perspective.

### **Part II: Tipping Point Interventions Across Crises: Following the Process of Change Model**

Part II has six chapters, each covering a different crisis and showing how the process of change links them all in both theory and practice. These chapters cover trauma, suicide, grief and mourning, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault. Chapter 5 on trauma is offered as an overview of what is often encountered across various crises. Chapter 6 on suicide is an example of what we have termed an *incidental crisis*. Chapter 7 on grief and mourning reflects what is mainly a *developmental crisis*, although it is sometimes incidental as in unexpected deaths and killings. Chapters 8 and 9 on intimate partner violence and sexual assault, respectively, are examples of what we have termed *endemic crises* in that they are largely a product of entrenched language and cultural factors. Chapter 10 offers a summary, conclusions, and future directions for practice, applying the process of change model briefly to a range of other crises and addressing the needs of the practitioner before summarizing the model and the take-home messages of the book.

## **THE PROCESS OF CHANGE MODEL**

At the end of each succeeding chapter, a set of bulleted points summarizes the key points of that chapter and moves forward the process of change model of crisis intervention and brief therapy. To initiate that format and to preview the essence of the process of change model, this Introduction concludes with a set of bullet points describing some of the core elements of the model to be laid out in succeeding chapters.

The key elements of the process of change model are as follows:

- Crises evolve from perceived potentially risky shifts in the ongoing flow of peoples' lives.
- Crises are always relative to the norms and views of those experiencing them.
- The form, identity, and process of crises are thus shaped by how such situations are viewed by those involved.
- People will most often use tried-and-true solutions to address these perceived risks.
- When initial solutions fail, rigidly repeated failed solutions feed the vicious cycles of most all crises.
- Shifts in perspectives of the situation and/or shifts in failed solutions are most often the key to crisis resolution.
- However, such shifts from the norm are typically experienced as paradoxical, counterintuitive, and even riskier than the crisis itself.
- Yet people are often most open to new views and solutions when all of their past efforts have repeatedly failed at these tipping points.
- Rapid intervention at such tipping points offers a window of opportunity to introduce often profound redirection of such vicious cycles and even initiate growth and transformation.
- Aligning peoples' values and goals with the new and often creative view and direction often yields not only rapid resolution but also potential growth and transformation.
- Finally, the literature on effective crisis intervention approaches across all different crises follows the same form, thus unifying effective crisis intervention and brief treatment across all crises and models through the process of change model as will be shown in Part II.