

Crisis in the Classroom: Case-Based Activities for Teaching Psychological First Aid

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Abstract

There is a growing need for beginning counselors to be able to effectively assess and respond to clients in crisis. Stand-alone crisis courses are not always a feasible option for counselor training programs; however, using a case-based approach to crisis training may provide programs the opportunities to infuse crisis training throughout the curriculum in a manner both challenging and supportive to students. In this paper, two cases are presented which may be used to train beginning counselors to assess and respond to crisis using the Psychological First Aid model of crisis response.

Keywords: crisis, psychological first aid, counselor training

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As counselors, we believe that nearly any individual or group may benefit from counseling services. However, many individuals never interface with counselors or counseling services until a crisis or traumatic event occurs (Wachter Morris & Barrio Minton, 2012). Unfortunately, crisis may strike an individual or group at any time, leaving survivors to cope with an array of difficulties. In 2015, there were 1.2 million violent crimes reported. Of those crimes, murder, rape, and robbery were noted in the United States alone, this was a 3.9% increase from 2014 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015.). In the same year, there were nearly 3,000 injuries and deaths related to natural disasters in the United States, costing close to five million dollars in damages (National Weather Service, 2015). Additionally, 44,000 individuals die by suicide in the United States each year (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, n.d.). Suicide costs the nation 44 billion dollars annually, but the emotional cost to individuals and families is much greater. These crisis situations, among others, give counselors unique opportunities to access clients in need and to provide both short-term and long-term crisis response services.

Due to the array of crisis situations clients may experience, which precipitate a need for or access to counseling, there is a growing need for crisis training in counseling classrooms. This process occurs with the purpose prepare students and new counselors to respond appropriately. The 2009 CACREP standards first introduced crisis training into the counseling curriculum by requiring that all accredited programs train students to identify and respond appropriately to individuals and communities in crisis. The 2016 CACREP standards followed suit, integrating increased references to crisis, trauma, disaster prevention and response training. Requirements for training in these areas now appear in four of the eight core curricular areas, six of the seven specialty areas, and the area of doctoral training.

A 2012 study conducted by Morris and Minton which surveyed 193 new counseling professionals found that 85% of those surveyed had encountered a client in crisis, yet one third had not been provided with any crisis response training. Additionally, Barrio Minton and Pease-Carter (2011) reported that in a survey of 52 CACREP-accredited counseling programs, over half of the programs did not offer crisis training until students had completed their core courses and were enrolled in clinical courses (practicum or internship).

Case-Based Educational Approaches

With the requirements for crisis training present in the CACREP standards (2016), many programs have struggled to know how to effectively include crisis training in the curriculum. Some counselor training programs have introduced stand-alone crisis courses to familiarize counselors with the basic tenets of crisis assessment and response; however, simple exposure to crisis response coursework material may not necessarily prepare counselors to understand the contextual frameworks created by crisis situations (Dupre, Echterling, Meixner, Anderson, & Kielty, 2014). Positively, students who receive any form of crisis training (even a singular lesson) before beginning their first practicum clinical work experience significantly less anxiety and higher confidence when treating clients in crisis during their training (Binkley & Leibert, 2015). In order to arm students with the necessary confidence and tools to respond to clients in crisis, it is advisable that crisis training be infused throughout the curriculum, most notably before students begin their clinical coursework.

One simple way of providing crisis training throughout multiple curricular courses is by presenting students with crisis-related case studies. The use of case studies in crisis preparation provide students with a means of learning challenging material in a safe environment (Greene, Williams, Harris, Travis, & Kim, 2016). Greene et al. (2016) found that a case-based approach to training crisis response yielded an increase in students' counselor self-efficacy comparable to the self-efficacy increases obtained through participation in a stand-alone crisis course. Therefore, if a counselor training program is not able to provide students with a stand-alone crisis course, case-based lessons infused throughout the pre-clinical curriculum may provide an alternative means of preparing students to more confidently respond to crisis situations once they begin working with clients. Thus, this paper will present two case studies that instructors may use to help counseling students understand and become familiar with the foundations of crisis assessment and response with the Psychological First Aid model.

Psychological First Aid

Counselors must be prepared to assess crisis situations quickly and effectively, while also being ready to respond to those in immediate need. There are numerous existing theories and models of crisis response. One model that has gained popularity due to its "provision of practical assistance" is Psychological First Aid (Jacobs, Gray, Erickson, Gonzales, & Quevillon, 2016, p. 1310), or PFA. PFA was designed as an empirically-based, user-friendly model for responding to individuals and groups affected by crisis, disaster, and acts of terrorism. As a model, it synthesizes and operationalizes many common elements found throughout multiple crisis response models (Watson, 2015). Both survivors and crisis responders can be treated with PFA, and responders may consist of variety of crisis workers, from counselors and medical staff to faith-based organizations and disaster relief teams (NCTSN & NCPTSD, 2006).

PFA should be used in the “immediate aftermath” of a crisis or disaster (NCTSN & NCPTSD, 2006, pg. 6) and can be used in a variety of diverse settings with any age group. The training manual is free and available online, and it outlines basic guidelines for how response workers should ethically and professionally enter a crisis or disaster setting. Although the manual is meant to be used by a variety of crisis response service providers, of particular note, is that the “provider must be knowledgeable about the nature of the event, current circumstances, and the type and availability of relief and support services” (NCTSN & NCPTSD, 2006, p. 13). Providers should be well-trained and well-informed in their areas of expertise before attempting to deliver PFA. Thusly, it lends itself as an effective manual by professionals such as counselors.

The PFA model (NCTSN & NCPTSD, 2006) outlines eight core tasks and their corresponding goals that should be the focus of service delivery:

1. Contact and Engagement

Goal: To respond to contacts initiated by survivors, or to initiate contacts in a non-intrusive, compassionate, and helpful manner.

2. Safety and Comfort

Goal: To enhance immediate and ongoing safety, as well as, provide physical and emotional comfort.

3. Stabilization (if needed)

Goal: To calm and orient emotionally overwhelmed or disoriented survivors.

4. Information Gathering: Current Needs and Concerns

Goal: To identify immediate needs and concerns, gather additional information, and tailor Psychological First Aid interventions.

5. Practical Assistance

Goal: To offer practical help to survivors in addressing immediate needs and concerns.

6. Connection with Social Supports

Goal: To help establish brief or ongoing contacts with primary support persons and other sources of support, including family members, friends, and community helping resources.

7. Information on Coping

Goal: To provide information about stress reactions and coping to reduce distress and promote adaptive functioning.

8. Linkage with Collaborative Services

Goal: To link survivors with available services needed at the time or in the future. (p. 19)

The first four tasks and subsequent goals generally cover the assessment needs that arise in a crisis situation; they provide guidance to professional crisis workers regarding how to contact clients immediately following a crisis, and how to determine what needs are present in the situation. The last four tasks and subsequent goals help professional crisis workers to

respond to the needs assessed in a given crisis situation; these tasks involve both immediate and long-term assistance for those affected by crisis. There is no specific amount of time that should be dedicated to each task; instead, providers should utilize professional skills and abilities to evaluate the needs of each survivor being treated in the days and weeks following a crisis event. Although the tasks can generally be followed in the order in which they are outlined, some tasks may overlap, or need to be repeated multiple times (NCTSN & NCPTSD, 2006).

PFA gives crisis responders, such as counselors, an accessible structure for how to plan for and respond to crises when they occur. Through the utilization of PFA, counselors are able to organize their prevention, assessment, and response efforts while ensuring all survivor needs are met. However, for professionals to become comfortable with the process of applying PFA to crisis scenarios, beginning counselors may wish to practice using the model in lower-risk settings, such as the classroom. This paper presents two case studies which may be used in classroom settings to give students an opportunity to practice using PFA in a safe environment with the supervision and feedback of an instructor. Both case studies are presented for use with small groups, such that students may benefit from collaboration and feedback from peers.

Assignment 1, Crisis Assessment: PFA Tasks 1-4

This activity is best completed in groups, as it is designed to help students brainstorm from multiple perspectives about what resources would be most necessary to assess a crisis situation. The individuals participating should begin the assignment by informing students that they will be assigned roles of various individuals who are involved in a crisis at a mental health clinic, and they should approach the assignment from the perspective of these assigned roles. The next step in the process would be to divide the class into small groups. Groups may vary in size depending on the needs of the class and time constraints. Each group should be assigned a role so that each group has a different role. For instance, one group may be asked to examine the role of “Darren” while another group examines the role of “injured nurse.” Potential roles are: targeted counselor, counselor working in clinic, client in waiting room, Darren, newscaster, desk attendant, injured nurse, police officer, family member, or clinic staff member. It is not crucial that every role be used; roles may be chosen by the instructor based on the needs of the class.

Once students are divided into groups, it is advisable to give each group a crisis scenario such as the one outlined below. Ask groups to imagine the scenario specifically from the perspective of their assigned role and paying special attention to what needs to become present for the individual role which they were assigned. Let students know that this situation is not a common occurrence, but one of many possible “worst case scenarios” that counselors should be prepared for. It shows how quickly an event can spiral out of control and become a crisis. It also highlights the need for a comprehensive crisis plan designed to support timely and systematic assessment.

Scenario:

A community mental health agency is conducting business as usual when an individual (Darren) bursts through the front door into the lobby where several clients are seated, waiting for their counseling appointments. The individual runs up to the intake counter, screaming unintelligibly, and demands to see his counselor. When he is informed that the counselor is with another client, he

becomes even more belligerent, and pulls out a gun, demanding again to see the counselor. He waves the gun wildly around, causing everyone in the lobby to scream and duck for cover. In the chaos and confusion, Darren becomes disoriented and fires the gun haphazardly, screaming at everyone to “shut up.” A nurse behind the counter is struck by the stray bullet and screams. As the receptionist and other workers rush to her aid, Darren forces his way into the hallway where his counselor’s office is located. As he does so, several clients escape through the front door. A few clients call 911, and sirens rush to the scene within minutes. One client uploads a cellphone video of the incident to social media; once the news media are alerted to the situation, the video is linked to the news story and goes viral within hours. Several family members of clients and agency workers see the video, and the agency phones ring off the hook. When police and media arrive on the scene, there are a handful of clients still in the lobby and parking lot, shaken from the incident. Some are crying, some seem more disoriented, and all are asking the receptionist for help. A few witnesses report having seen Darren run out the back door of the building and escape into the woods bordering the property. Several of the police officers present leave the scene in pursuit of Darren. Everyone on site is detained until more police officers can arrive for health clearance and questioning.

Crisis assessment is a process that is designed to determine immediate and long-term needs. This scenario gives students the opportunity to assess a crisis situation through the eyes of various individuals involved while practicing applying the PFA model. The first four PFA core actions (Contact and Engagement, Safety and Comfort, Stabilization, and Information Gathering) are assessment-oriented, providing the crisis worker with guidelines for gathering information and determining what needs are present for crisis survivors.

Once students have read the scenario, ask each group to consider the needs of the person in the individual role they were assigned through the lens of the PFA model. What contact should be made with their assigned individual, and how should this contact ideally be made? What does this individual need to be kept safe and comfortable? What efforts must be made to stabilize this individual? What information is still needed, and how should this information best be gathered from and about this individual? In small groups, students should discuss the needs of the individual in the role assigned to their group.

Upon the students engaging in a discussion of the roles assigned to their small groups, the class should be brought back together for a whole-class discussion. Take time to process thoughts, feelings, and reactions that occurred for students while discussing the scenario. In small groups, what needs were identified? Give each group a chance to report to the class the needs identified for their assigned individual. Then, address the whole class collectively and discuss how individual needs overlap or differ for the different individuals assigned to each group. Once needs have been identified for each of the individual roles assigned to the small groups, help the class begin to shift their thoughts toward crisis response. Some potential questions that can be asked are: What resources are needed? Are they accessible? If not, how can they be accessed? Although crisis response is not the focus of this assignment, these questions may help students begin to recognize the link between crisis assessment and response.

Additionally, as a class, students may discuss how a comprehensive crisis plan may lend itself to effective crisis assessment.

Assignment 2, Crisis Response: PFA Tasks 5-8

This assignment will shift the focus to helping students learn to respond to crisis. The assignment is designed to be completed by students in small groups. For this assignment, students will receive the below case scenario. Although the scenario takes place in a fanciful and futuristic world, ask students to imagine for the sake of the assignment that the described world could be real. However, they should also be advised not to get caught up in whether the details are realistic or not. The scene is meant to be imaginary. When counselors find themselves responding to crisis scenarios, often they are thrown into unknown territory; therefore, an imaginary case scenario is used to help students envision responding to survivors, regardless of how unfamiliar the setting is.

The purpose of this assignment is for students to work through the last four core tasks delineated by PFA (Practical Assistance, Connection with Social Supports, Information on Coping, and Linkage with Collaborative Services). These tasks are response-oriented, they are the steps that take place after a crisis situation has been assessed and needs have been determined. Divide the class into four groups and assign each group one of the four core tasks. Give each group the scenario to read and let them know they will have questions to answer as a group regarding the core task assigned to them.

Scenario:

It is the year 2030, and the world has made incredible advancements in technology. Among these advancements is the ability to send human beings to live on Mars. A small community of specialists, mostly scientists and medical professionals, have already been living there for a few years. They were sent to establish a livable infrastructure and identify areas of concern that may need troubleshooting before members of the general population are brought in to reside there. The biggest identified concern is the dust storms that take place on Mars' surface. The dust storms occur at irregular intervals and cause varying levels of damage. Although the team of scientists has installed multiple safety features in the living quarters, the storms are not preventable and will always be a part of life on Mars. There has already been one dust storm that caused widespread destruction; most of the housing structure was demolished and over half of the people living on Mars at that time were killed, with many others injured. World organizations are interested in moving members of the population to Mars within the next year. However, before anyone can be cleared to go, a comprehensive crisis response plan must be developed for responding to the dust storms when they occur.

A team on Earth is being assembled to develop the "Dust Storm Crisis Event Response Plan." A group of individuals from varying backgrounds have been asked to serve on the development team. Once the plan is in place, members of the general population may begin residing on Mars. However, one of the long-term impacts of the destruction caused by the major dust storm was that some of the survivors experienced symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They

have been evaluated and treated but, rightfully, medical teams would like to avoid this impact in the future by putting in place professionals who can respond in a timely manner. Because of these mental health concerns brought about by the dust storm, you (a counselor) have been asked to serve on the development team.

In this scenario, involved counselors would already know and understand the nature of the potential crisis at hand, just as any counselor should be knowledgeable about any crisis situation to which they are called upon to respond. Given their knowledge of the potential for crisis-level dust storms on Mars, each group should outline the response interventions needed for their assigned core task. For instance, in the event of a dust storm crisis, what types of practical assistance may be needed, and who should be available to provide it? How can survivors be linked with social supports? Who will be available to provide survivors with information on coping, and what information will be needed? Finally, how can survivors be linked with collaborative services? What services might these be, and what timeline will be used? Students should consider services, personnel, resources, logistics, infrastructure, communication, and procedures. They should be encouraged to access crisis planning resources such as the Red Cross and FEMA websites, or their textbooks.

Once each group has determined the needed response efforts for their assigned task, each group should report out their findings to the whole class. You may also have groups create visual aids (posters, Power Point slides, etc.) outlining components of necessary response efforts. As a class, a whole group discussion should take place regarding the process of planning for crisis response. This discussion should highlight the crucial importance of a crisis prevention plan designed to assist counselors in providing immediate response when crisis occurs.

Although this particular case scenario is one in which students are not likely to find themselves as professionals, the goal of using it is to provide students with an opportunity to explore crisis support systems and brainstorm various crisis response delivery methods. The scenario is purposefully unrealistic so that students do not feel constrained by any prior contexts or events they may have experienced. Rather, this scenario allows students to work outside the box. Furthermore, the unknown setting encourages them to examine multiple types of possible responses, by providing students with an opportunity to consider needs previously outside of their awareness.

Considerations

The cases presented here are meant to assist instructors in teaching Psychological First Aid to beginning counseling students, and thus, should be presented by instructors in a supervised environment. Nevertheless, both cases may also be used in online or blended learning formats, provided students in those courses have both instructor supervision and feedback available to them. Additionally, the cases outlined are designed to take place in small groups. The cases may be adapted by instructors for individual student work, either inside the classroom or as take-home assignments. The cases may be used independently of one another but were created in tandem to provide students the opportunity to practice both crisis assessment and crisis response skills, both major components of Psychological First Aid.

Each of these cases is meant to provide students with an opportunity to practice identifying and implementing crisis response strategies. Although the first active shooter scenario in the first case could very well occur in a mental health setting, neither case is intended

to simulate experiences that counselors should expect to encounter during professional practice. The aim of using these cases in a classroom or learning environment is to provide students with opportunities to examine the tenets of crisis assessment and response in a safe environment, which may lead to increased self-efficacy for beginning counselors when they face crisis situations in practice (Greene et al., 2016).

It should be noted that these cases have not been empirically validated for training purposes. In the future, measuring student self-efficacy and skill using Psychological First Aid with the utilization of these case studies could prove fruitful for broadening the available research on case-based approaches to training.

Conclusion

There exists a growing need for counselors to be able to appropriately assess and respond to crisis. Additionally, CACREP (2016) requires all students to be trained in crisis response. Case-based approaches to crisis training can provide students opportunities for practicing challenging crisis response skills in a safe environment (Greene et al., 2016), while providing programs a means of training that can be infused throughout the curriculum. This paper presented two cases which may be used for teaching beginning counselors to assess and respond to crisis using the Psychological First Aid model of crisis response. Although there is little research on case-based approaches to training crisis response, the literature on case-based approaches to teaching is favorable for both students and educators. Future research in this area could greatly contribute to the body of existing knowledge.

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