

The ToDo Institute's

Guide to Navigating Through Crisis

By Gregg Krech

Crisis is accompanied by uncertainty. We wish we could know what's going to happen. We wish we could know that the situation will turn out OK. We wish we had some assurance that there is no need to worry. But the only assurance we have is that things will change and that worrying will have little impact on the situation.

Is it possible to get through life without facing some type of crisis? The past several years have brought an onslaught of natural disasters including floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes and tsunamis. We watch these crises from a distance – but then one day we find that we are the ones in crisis.

It might be a divorce, diagnosis of a serious illness, death of a loved one or being laid off from a long term job. For Jeff and Sylvia the economic meltdown wiped out more than half the money that was going to fund their retirement next year. For Dave, it was getting laid off by a company that had employed him for the past 22 years. For Denise it was discovering that her spiritual teacher had been involved in conduct she considered immoral and deceptive. Every crisis is different, but in each case it feels as if the floor has been pulled out from under you and you can't find a single solid place to stand. In many cases the circumstances of our lives are thrown into chaos. Our emotional and psychological well-being is thrown into chaos, as well. It's like narrowly escaping a sinking ship only to find yourself in a lifeboat where your companions are despair, confusion, depression, hopelessness and sorrow. These are the times when we are least able to cope with the challenges life is sending us, and yet they are times when we cannot afford to cope poorly.

What can we do to “keep it together” and get through a crisis in one piece? Are we resilient enough to meet a formidable challenge and come away stronger -- psychologically and spiritually?

I've been studying and teaching Japanese psychology for more than twenty years. It offers very practical suggestions for what to do as we encounter some of the most difficult challenges we've ever faced. These are the times when we find ourselves working at our edge. This is the place where we are pushed just beyond what we're able to handle. It's uncharted territory. We wander through confusion and exhaustion and disappointment.

There's a Japanese saying, *Seven Times Down, Eight Times Up*. Eventually we all get knocked down. It's not pleasant, and sometimes we just feel like laying there rather than



making the effort to get up. But somehow we manage to get up. No matter how many times you fall, you have to just keep getting up.

Drawing on some of the basic principles of Japanese Psychology (Morita and Naikan therapies), I would like to offer the following nine guidelines for coping with crisis.

Accept Reality

This may sound easy, but for many of us it's one of the biggest hurdles we face in a crisis. Our minds cling to the way things were before. We hold on to the images of life before we were laid off, before our investments took a nosedive, before our house was demolished by a tornado.

After 18 years of marriage, Joanne's husband Stephen asked her for a divorce. She was stunned. They had their problems, of course, but don't all marriages? What she didn't suspect was that Stephen was having an affair with his administrative assistant. Suddenly Joanne found herself facing life with two young children, no job, and no husband. Throughout the first several weeks Joanne would lament, "I can't believe this is happening to me." But as the weeks turned into months, her lament didn't change. She found the reality of her situation unacceptable, so she had not accepted it.

Eventually she'll have to. Her salvation lies in accepting the situation so she can get started on building a new life for herself and her children. Sooner or later we have to accept our circumstances; the question is *when* we will reach that point? The longer it takes us, the more likely we are to suffer in the interim. In some cases, we'll decide to try and change our circumstances (like overcoming cancer) but we still have to start from the point of accepting the situation as we encounter it – with all the pain, discomfort and disappointment it brings.

It's not only the external conditions of our life which need to be accepted. It's the internal conditions as well – the overwhelming feelings and thoughts we experience such as fear, anxiety, despair or hopelessness. Psychiatrist Shoma Morita used the term "arugamama" to describe the state in which we simply "accept things as they are." He believed it was fruitless to try to "work on" or change our feelings or thoughts. A better solution was just to accept them the way we accept distracting thoughts and feelings during meditation – we notice them and bring our attention back to our breath. If you're beginning the process of looking for a new job, it's normal to have feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and frustration, etc. . . Rather than use your energy to try to elevate your mood, you can accept these feelings as natural and learn to coexist with them as you move through the challenging and painful process of separation. This idea of "coexisting with feelings" is what distinguishes Morita therapy from many other approaches.

"Our goal should not be to avoid falling down. Our goal should be to learn to fall and get up quickly."

- Gregg Krech

Many traditional approaches to therapy emphasize the need to talk about one's distress as a way of "getting it out." In some cases, talking about our suffering can help us accept the situation. But in most cases it isn't helpful at all. It simply reminds us about the turbulence and tragedy of what has happened. Emotionally, we experience the suffering all over again.

The key, in the beginning, is acceptance. We work with the situation as it is. When I worked in refugee camps in Thailand I met people who had lived in plush high rise apartments before the reign of Pol Pot. They drove BMW's and went out to lunch daily. Now they were living in a thatched roof hut with a dirt floor. It's tragic, but the only way to move forward is to start where you are.

It's very much like going for a long walk and getting caught in an unexpected rainstorm. Once you accept the fact that you are going to get drenched you stop trying to avoid the rain and are free to simply walk.

Once you are home, you can concentrate on getting dry.

Sort Things Out

In a crisis, confusion often reigns. What do I do? Where do I turn? How am I ever going to handle this? One of the best ways to sort things out is to look at the situation and determine what is controllable (by you) and what isn't. I'll often help someone organize this information on paper. Dave's crisis came when he was laid off from his job at IBM after 22 years. We tried to get a clear idea of what was controllable: updating his resume, searching for comparable job openings on the Internet, posting his resume to relevant sites on the Internet, getting a letter of reference from his former supervisor, developing a family budget for the next 12 months, applying for unemployment compensation, getting additional training in web site development, etc . . . The goal of actually getting a new job (getting hired) was not controllable. But he could move forward and do what was within his power to do.

Sorting out the controllable and uncontrollable helps us get clarity on where to put our efforts. It can help us realize that we are unlikely to change the behavior of others no matter how hard we push, persuade and manipulate. We often can't control the outcome of our efforts or the timing of when, and how, people respond to us.

When there's been a fire or a flood, eventually you go back to your house and you begin sorting through your belongings. Some things can be salvaged. Many things have to be thrown away. Most of us have seen images of the aftermath of the tsunami in Japan. The process of sorting these out is heartbreaking. But it has to be done. In the same way we have to sort out what we can do that is controllable, and what is beyond our control. This is the antidote to confusion and despair.

Every crisis tests our faith – our willingness to trust that life will unfold the way it needs to unfold. The crisis brings us face to face with the limits of our power to control the world in which we live. Ultimately our personal destiny and the destiny of friends,

family, even the planet, is outside our control. Yet it is still important to do what we can do, for our ability to shape the future will never be known until long after we have taken action. As Gandhi said, “*Whatever you do may seem insignificant, but it is important that you do it.*”

Don't Rush Decisions or Make Impulsive Choices

Connie and Jim never dreamed they would be having this conversation. But it was happening and it was every parent's worst nightmare. In a small room in a hospital in Wisconsin they were being graciously asked if they would be willing to permit their daughter's organs to be donated to others. On Tuesday she had a skiing accident and now she lay on death's doorstep in a hospital bed. How can anyone make this decision in such a situation? But you have to make the decision, one way or the other. There is almost no time to think it over, only a few minutes. They decided to go ahead and allow the organ donation and the result was something nobody expected (that's another story that you can read -- *The Taking of Life and the Giving of Life* by Linda Anderson Krech <http://www.todoinstitute.com/library>).

In most crisis situations we don't have to make a decision in a few minutes and we shouldn't. This isn't the time for acting on impulse or jumping to conclusions. More often than not, it is time for quiet reflection and the counsel of others whose opinions we respect. Sometimes the situation feels so urgent, so critical, that we feel compelled to make a quick decision. But we should ask ourselves, “Is this a decision that needs to be made NOW? Can it wait till tomorrow, or even next week. What is the real cost of delay? What is the real benefit of deciding quickly?” As a general rule, it's not wise to make an important decision when you're upset or in a highly agitated state. If you have to make a decision quickly, and you feel confused or unsure, try taking small steps rather than diving into an impulsive course of action.

Breakdown or Breakthrough?

In a study by Dr. Peter Ebersole and Dr. Joan Flores of the California State University at Fullerton reports were gathered from ninety-six volunteers on the amount of positive growth they may have experienced from what they judged to be their most difficult life crisis. Most often the traumas involved other people who were close to them. For twenty seven of the participants the trauma was illness or death of a family member; for twenty six, the breakup of a meaningful relationship; and for ten, the divorce of their parents. Among the other traumas were their own injury or sickness, sexual abuse or incest, or failure at school or work. Most significantly, the participants emphasized the ability to “transcend” the experience or rise above the crushing short-term trauma by developing a positive attitude about the experience or its long term consequences. For the majority of the individuals in the Ebersole/Flores study, the long-term impact was positive. Particularly striking is the fact that while gathering this new perception of a single event, the subjects also underwent a profound change in their outlook on life. Instead of the experience causing a breakdown, it brought forth a breakthrough to a new and deeper appreciation of themselves and others. A traumatic experience, therefore, is not inherently destructive and may be one means by which a person continues to evolve and come to a more meaningful understanding and appreciation of life itself.

(adapted from Sound Mind, Sound Body (Simon and Schuster) by Dr. Kenneth Pelletier)

Remember: Your Feelings and Emotional Suffering Will Fade Over Time

Kokoro is a Japanese word that is often translated as *mind/heart*. The mind and heart are not separate elements but a single inseparable force at the center of our human existence. Our minds/hearts are designed to be self-healing entities. The most important element of this healing process is time. The emotional suffering that is present during a crisis can be intense. But that intensity cannot be maintained, even if we wanted to maintain it. This applies to pleasant emotional intensity as well. We simply can't maintain the romantic bliss that we experience in the first few weeks or months of a new relationship. The romantic excitement of that experience may mature into a genuine love for the other person, but the emotional intensity will naturally fade. This should be a great comfort to us when we find our emotional pain unbearable during the hurricane-like force of a crisis. But we forget this natural law of *kokoro* and believe instead that this pain will go on forever.



In some situations we don't necessarily want our painful feelings to fade because they are connected to our memories of someone we love or loved. So we're torn – we don't want to suffer so much, but neither do we want to lose our intimate memories of someone with whom we had shared our life.

Feelings and memories won't fade completely, but we may get to the point where we can look back and laugh at something that, at the time, was a real crisis for us. Over the years, our feelings subside and become more and more bearable, particularly when they are crowded out by new events, circumstances and encounters, many of which stimulate a new and fresh set of emotions – some pleasant and some not so pleasant.

I had major knee surgery twenty five years ago. The pain is gone, the incisions have healed, but there are several large scars around my right knee. I've learned to live with the scars and with the limitations of a knee that will never function quite as well as it used to. My left leg actually grew stronger to compensate for the weakness of the injured knee. The events of our crisis become our "karma" and the feelings that once consumed us fulfill their own destiny just as snowflakes must eventually melt and return to their source.

The pain we feel will subside. Give it time.
We want it to go away right now.
But it needs time.

Persevere and Ground Yourself in Constructive Activity

Remember the Japanese maxim that goes “Seven Times Down, Eight Times Up.” I wrote a story by the same name (see *A Finger Pointing to the Moon*) about a woman who had been working all day on a paper for graduate school when her computer crashed and all her work disappeared. She hadn’t saved the paper or printed it out, so all her work simply dissolved. Now what? In order to pass her course and eventually graduate she had to sit down and begin re-writing the paper. Regardless of the type of endeavor – graduate school, writing a novel, starting a new business – it is not likely to go smoothly. This is the rule rather than the exception. No matter how intelligent we are or how well we have planned, we will eventually encounter a challenge that knocks us down. If we can summon up the strength to get up and persevere, we will probably get knocked down again.

So our goal should not be to avoid falling down. Our goal should be to learn to fall and get up quickly. Falling is often one of the first lessons of martial arts and getting up is a skill, even an art. My family recently saw a very talented circus performer named Gregory Popovich. He had incredible balance and dexterity and was an outstanding juggler. He was performing a juggling act that involved progressively juggling more and more balls (which were thrown higher and higher) and then ending the routine by perfectly catching them all. As he performed, one of the balls dropped. He picked it up, without missing a beat, and started again. Again, he dropped a ball. He made a silly face, causing the audience to laugh, and moved right into another attempt at the routine. This time he succeeded. Though you could not help but be impressed by his juggling, I was really more impressed by how he handled his failures.

In a crisis, part of the falling/recovering process is continuing to engage in constructive activity even while our thoughts and feelings are in emotional turmoil. First, we do the best we can to keep our foundation of daily activity healthy. We make our bed, shower and put on clean clothes, wash dishes and tend to those elements of life (children, gardens, pets) which need our support and attention. Second, we take constructive steps, where possible, towards resolving or responding to the crisis situation. This may involve making an appointment to get a second opinion about our diagnosis or finding temporary living space for our family when our house has burned down. This involves the skill of coexisting with our feelings (discussed at greater length in [*A Natural Approach to Mental Wellness*](#)). Ironically, many of us are more skillful when we are in the midst of a true crisis than a pseudo-crisis. It’s almost as if the urgency and importance of the situation demands that we rise to the occasion.

By grounding ourselves in purposeful activity, we not only accomplish something useful but we provide opportunities for our attention to become absorbed in the present moment of activity rather than ruminating and daydreaming about our situation and suffering.

Work with Your Attention

Perhaps one of the most important lessons one can learn from Japanese Psychology is that “*Your experience of life is not based on your life, but on what you pay attention to.*” When I am caught up in a crisis, what am I most likely to pay attention to? ME! My attention continuously gravitates towards my feelings, my suffering, my thoughts, my concerns, my mistakes, my pain, and my options. So I now have two problems: the challenge posed by my circumstances *and the suffering caused by a heightened degree of self-focused attention.* The solution to the latter is simple, though not necessarily easy. We have to become skillful in using our attention. We have to consciously direct our attention and, most often, that means directing our attention away from ourselves and towards the world around us.

Here are three suggestions for learning how to work with your attention:

- A. ***Get your body moving.*** Your attention shifts more naturally and easily when your body is engaged in physical activity. Gardening, hiking, carpentry, basketball, mechanical repairs, building something, playing with children – all are examples of activities which help to shift your attention and absorb you in the present moment. Activities that are fast paced and require large muscle movement (i.e. racquetball) are more likely to shift your attention than those that are slow paced, repetitive and use less muscle activity (i.e. knitting). Activities that are unpredictable (i.e. whitewater rafting) are more likely to shift attention than . . . well . . . knitting. (I have nothing against knitting, really, but this explains why people can knit and still concentrate moderately well on a meeting or social conversation.)
- B. ***Use an outside prompt*** (like an alarm on your watch) to remind you to shift your attention to what’s going on around you. In the essay ***This is Your Wake-up Call*** ([Thirty Thousand Days](#), Vol.9, No.3) I discuss using a watch alarm to catch my attention at least once an hour. When prompted by the alarm I notice where my attention is directed (“thinking about whether or not to see a doctor about a health problem I’m having”) and to shift it to what’s going on around me (sounds of children playing, a cardinal at the birdfeeder just outside my office window, the aroma of my wife making curried vegetable soup).
- C. ***Keep a notebook or journal*** with notes about the crisis situation. What is the problem? What are your options? Are there deadlines for taking action? What needs to be done? What additional issues are raised by the situation? By writing these things down in a single place you not only help organize yourself but you capture information so it doesn’t continually pop up in your mind (*Don’t forget to respond to the letter from the lawyer*). When counseling people in crisis, I’ve found that they often repeat the same conversation (verbally, as well as mentally) and by writing things down it frees up the mind to be more present throughout the day. If necessary, set aside time each evening to review your journal and add to it, or reflect on what you’ve written. Dedicate time to reflecting and analyzing your situation instead of doing it haphazardly throughout the day.

Keep in mind that your attention is your experience. In the midst of your struggle, try to stay present, engaged and connected to the details of the world around you.

Set Aside Time for Quiet Self-Reflection

In a crisis it's common for us to look only at the problems we face and to feel a bit sorry for ourselves. This ignores, however, the many ways in which we are supported, even as we contend with serious challenges to our finances, health or welfare. Imagine you are lying on a beach in a tropical paradise. It's a beautiful, sunny day. You can hear the sound of gentle waves against the shore. You have everything you need, a cold drink, sunglasses, a wonderful book, a comfortable blanket to lay on. Suddenly you are bit by a mosquito – a very large and voracious mosquito. In that instant, your attention is riveted to the painful sensation from the bite on your arm. Awareness of the ideal conditions which surround and support you has dissolved as you focus on the bite. So in a crisis we face this challenge: How can we maintain the presence of mind to see the support we are receiving and acknowledge the blessings of our life even as we are being bit by hungry mosquitoes?

“the only time we ever really know what’s going on is when the rug’s been pulled out and we can’t find anywhere to land. We use these situations either to wake ourselves or to put ourselves to sleep.”

- Pema Chodron

In a recent issue of [*Thirty Thousand Days*](#) (Vol. 11, No. 3), Kara Jacobs, a recovering cancer patient, gives a wonderful example of how Naikan reflection can change our attitude towards our life and circumstances. Kara sustained permanent damage to her bone marrow. At times, she finds herself resenting the regular treatments (injections) that are required. But in reflecting on her situation she now finds a fresh perspective grounded more in gratitude for the support she has received.

Melissa Eriksen reflected on an accident she had while pregnant with her first child. She was waiting for a train at a Long Island Railroad station in New York when she fell (or was pushed) onto the track and hit by the oncoming train. This was a terrifying experience, yet years later she was able to reflect on all the ways she was supported in the aftermath of her accident – concrete support ranging from the ambulance drivers who drove her to the hospital to her employers assurance that she would continue to receive a paycheck through her lengthy period of rehabilitation ([*Thirty Thousand Days*](#), Vol. 10, No.1). She ultimately wrote a beautiful thank you note to the doctors that helped her.

The method of self-reflection used by these individuals is called **Naikan** and originated in Japan, developed by a man named Yoshimoto Ishin. It is a simple process that offers three questions for reflecting on another person or a particular period of time or event.

- What have I received from others?
- What have I given to others?
- What troubles and difficulties have I caused others?

I have written extensively about self-reflection in the book, **Naikan: Gratitude, Grace and the Japanese Art of Self-Reflection** (Stone Bridge Press, 2002). You can read more about it in the [feature interview](#) published in *The Sun Magazine*.

During the past 15 years I have witnessed many individuals go through a transformation of the way they view their lives, including some of the most challenging crises, by taking time for sincere and honest reflection on their past.

The purpose of Naikan reflection is not to get us to feel grateful for our problems, although sometimes that happens. More importantly, we reflect on our life so that our awareness is grounded in the truth of our life. There is a maxim in Naikan that says,

**“Examine Life Outside the
Boundaries of Your Suffering.”**

When we look outside our suffering we find a world that is supporting us in the midst of our suffering. In searching for the truth of our life there may times when we can look back on our circumstances and realize that a particular crisis was also a gift. And that it was due to the kindness and support of others that we were able to get up after a painful fall.

Search for Spiritual Meaning

For many people, a crisis can open a door to spiritual experience. On most days we go through life with the illusion that we have control. We really don't have control, but as long as things proceed according to our desires, we think we do. In a crisis, however, we are often faced with circumstances, most of which are beyond our control. Now our typical strategies don't necessarily work. So we are a bit lost. We find ourselves on a path that requires faith and trust, but we're not very good at having faith and trust. We're good at trying to control things. Christopher Reeve, the actor who was paralyzed after falling from a horse, spoke about loss of control,

“The more we try to control what happens to us, the greater our fear that we're no longer empowered, that there's no safety net, and that dangerous, unexpected things may

At one time or another, each of us confronts an experience so powerful, bewildering, joyous, or terrifying that all our efforts to see it as a “problem” are futile. Each of us is brought to the cliff's edge. At such moments we can either back away in bitterness or confusion, or leap forward into mystery. And what does mystery ask of us? Only that we be in its presence, that we fully, consciously, hand ourselves over. That is all, and that is everything. We can participate in mystery only by letting go of solutions. This letting go is the first lesson of falling, and the hardest.

- Philip Simmons

happen. Ironically, the act of trying to control what happens is what actually robs us of great experiences and diminishes us.”

Once you acknowledge the limits of your control you must rely on something greater than yourself. You may call it God, Buddha, or Higher Power, but whatever you call it, you are now open to a world of spiritual truth and meaning that often goes ignored when life is going your way. Our crisis becomes the birthplace of faith, of trust, of spiritual perspective and acceptance.

Help Someone Else

When we are in a crisis we naturally look for help, though some people have trouble accepting help even when they need it. Accepting help means acknowledging our limitations and our dependence on others. It humbles us. When I was in Costa Rica I injured my foot, and my ankle swelled up like a grapefruit. I was trying to hop uphill to get to my motel room when a couple approached me and offered me help. The husband had the physique of a large, black bear. I put my left arm over his shoulders to get support for my disabled leg, but it was awkward because he was so much bigger than me. Then he said, “Why don’t you just climb up on my back.” I hesitated for a moment. Did I really want to do this? But it was a sensible solution, so I climbed on his back and he carried me to the door of my room as other motel guests stared with a look that was both confused and amused. I felt silly and helpless, but I got back to my room intact.

“for many people helping others has been the agent that has made it possible to get through major life crises, to end bouts of depression that grow out of tremendous losses. Some argue that a couple of hours at work as a helper are as good as a strong anti-depressant.”

- Allan Luks

For many of us, we are keenly aware of our need for help in a crisis but when we are suffering we seldom think about helping others. Yet helping others reminds us that we have no exclusive claim upon pain and suffering. It prevents us from seeing ourselves as a “victim” and empowers us with the knowledge that even though we are struggling, we are capable of doing something meaningful for another person. Helping others breaks the cycle of self-focused attention and the

internal dialogue of comments about the difficulties of our personal situation.

In Japan there is a program for cancer patients called **Meaningful Life Therapy** founded by Dr. Jinroh Itami. (<http://www.todoinstitute.org/illness.html>) One of the important elements of the program is referred to as “helper therapy.” Cancer patients are routinely assigned the role of a helper, whether it be picking up trash in a local park or acting as a mentor for a newly diagnosed patient.

One of my most vivid images of working in refugee camps on the Cambodian border is of a middle-aged man in a hut who had been disabled by polio. His legs, ravaged by the

disease, appeared to be only as thick as a doorknob. His job, in the camp, *was to make artificial legs (prostheses) for people who had stepped on land mines trying to escape from the war.*

Philo of Alexandria said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.”

By helping others in their battle, we help ourselves as well.

Conclusion



I saw an ad for a tattoo company the other day. The website is named *yesithurts.net*. This is a bit surprising, since we would normally expect some type of reassurance that the process is painless. Most crises come with a certain amount of pain. We are challenged. We are stretched. We are pushed against our edge – the place where we just don’t know what to do or how to cope. We get trapped by self-pity or pointless questions like “why me?” Our minds tell us that we just don’t have the strength to handle what has been placed in our path -- but we gain strength in the process of handling these challenges. We learn to cope by coping. We dig our way out by facing the demands of each moment and responding to what we need to do. Then there’s the next thing. And the next thing. The whole situation seems overwhelming, but this next step, well, I can handle that.

We face each of these moments, and take each next step, while coexisting with pain, and confusion, and loss. For the moment, they’re our companions. Don’t be distracted by them, for they can occupy us so thoroughly that we forget our true purpose. Human beings have tremendous resilience. We can bounce back from pain and from tragedy as long as we are willing to abandon the image of ourselves as victims.

So if you are facing a crisis, regardless of its nature, face it head on. Handle it with integrity, for the way you handle it is your karma – the history you will live with. Ten years from now you’ll look back and see how you conducted yourself. You’re creating that film right now. Don’t be tempted by dishonesty, for it will haunt you and complicate your life. Don’t be seduced by avoidance, for the relief it offers pales in comparison with the pain it will cause later.

Most of all, expect to fall. Falling is part of the process.
Learn to fall.
Fall as often as you need to.
Just learn to get up.
And if you can manage to laugh at yourself, or your predicament, while you're getting up.
Then you've become a model for the rest of us.
A model of how we can cope with the challenges that we all encounter as we move forward on our own unique path in this world.

Good luck.

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Additional essays are available in the *Internet Library of Japanese Psychology*
www.todoinstitute.org/library

Books by Gregg Krech

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