

Marital crises



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Summary

The author draws on Crisis Theory, General System Theory and Family Development Theories in describing the crises that occur in marriage. Each marriage has its own rule system that governs its homeostatic balance. When a change occurs in the system that upsets the homeostatic balance a crisis can be

said to have occurred. There are then three possibilities : 1) The marriage returns to its usual functioning. 2) It gets worse. 3) It can improve.

The events and processes that bring about crises will be discussed. The crisis as a growth enhancing experience is discussed.

If marriages are subject to more stress than ever before, then we must assume that from our knowledge of systems theory, that this must be in the greater context of a larger world crisis.

I am afraid I must allude to these situations, which have been so often stated, as to begin to sound trite, although the implication for the future of marriage and the family are serious.

I am referring to the increasing technology, increasing mobility, and the breakdown of extended family and social relationships as well as the breakdown of traditional structures and hierarchies.

Self-realisation and self-actualisation, independence and freedom have become of paramount importance, even at the expense of losing stability and buffering support the extended family and community provides.

Definition

A marriage can be said to be in a state of crisis when a change occurs in the marital system which upsets the usual balance in the relationships, ie the homeostatic balance is upset. This results in a state of flux, disruption and emotional turmoil, which cannot be remedied by the usual coping mechanisms.

The system is very vulnerable at this stage, depending on the precipitating factors, the degree of outside support and the innate ability that the system has to function and cope, the outcome could be:

- Lack of resolution with a 'run-away', where vicious cycles ensue, with greater distancing and sense of pain, bewilderment and anger, etc. The end result of this could be marital separation, divorce or symptom-formation in one of the members of the system — for example, psychosomatic problems or psychological difficulties.
- The system can return to its usual level of functioning prior to the crisis.
- The crisis can be used constructively and can lead to strengthening of relationship bonds, ie. a "growth process".

I would like to present a comprehensive model to explain **why** crises occur, **when**

they occur and **what** factors increase or decrease their chances of healthy resolution.

I have chosen six interrelating parameters which interact with one another in a complex network that I call the marital context.

1 The individual

Individuals come into a marriage already with personalities well-developed and are "programmed" from their past experiences in their family of origin and previous generations. Their personalities



although mostly developed, will continue to grow and change in a new context, ie that of marital and family developmental stages over the years.

2 Marital pair

From our knowledge of systems theory, we know the whole is more than the sum of the parts, ie. the marriage is more than just the sum of the two individuals. We know a change in one individual causes a change in the other, and in a circular manner the other is in turn affected by this behaviour.

The marital system is inter-connected with other systems in the community, eg. the extended family and peer group and any changes that occur in these other systems over time will have a direct influence on the marital system which in turn will effect the other systems, again in a circular fashion.

3 The extended family

Needless to say, this system has a profound influence on the couple. At the

start, even today, they play a fairly large part in mate choice, although not in a direct fashion, but rather in the way the young adult may either want to please their parents and choose someone that they would like, or in the sense of rebelling against their parents values, and choosing somebody they do not like.

In both these cases, the chosen spouse may not be chosen in terms of the young adult's own needs. The extended family can be a very helpful buffer against marital stress in a psychological, financial, and in a practical sense as well.

The extended family can also, of course, aggravate, or stress, the marital system by interfering, or by non-acceptance of in-laws. It has been shown, that loss or serious illness of a significant parent can upset the balance of a marriage. Therefore, in any case of marital crisis one should explore the extended family and in particular, any serious loss therein.

4 The socio-cultural context

This clearly is part of the buffering system for a marriage and family. Families and couples who are "closed", and have rigid boundaries, are more prone to develop crises than families who are open to the outside world and who can release some of their stress in a constructive way, as well as be enriched by the newness and difference outside their own system. In the case of immigration, even an "open" family can develop severe stress if they are in a culture that is very different in language values, etc.

5 Vertical axis

Here I refer to the information that is transmitted to the present generation through time from previous generations. Certain values, and rules of life, taboos, idiosyncracies, are passed down through generations and have a powerful impact on the current generation.

This impact is often unconscious and is,

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as yet, not fully understood. For example, a male spouse may have inherited the idea that **honour is above all**, and when faced with stress, rather than disgrace himself and confess his vulnerabilities he would rather turn to alcohol in order to uphold this image and not disgrace his family heritage.

Another example may be in the case of a woman who believes that all women should unselfishly serve their men and feel fulfilled by this process. Clearly, this "message" would place a woman who aspires to improve herself and seeks independence, etc, in a terrible conflict. Conflict will clearly ensue, where each spouse has "messages" that are in direct conflict with one another, especially if this is not openly accepted.

For example, a liberated male may well profess to be pleased at his wife's search for individuality and education, etc, yet may inwardly, in terms of his own trans-generational set, be against this. His spouse then will be continually receiving double messages from him.

6 Horizontal axis

Here I refer to changes that take place in the marriage and family over time. They can be **unpredictable and hazardous events**, eg. accidents, death, illness, financial losses, wars, etc. or **developmental changes**.

The family developmental life-cycle

Theories on how individuals develop and change in time have been well described by people like Freud and Erikson. The family, too, changes in time in a fairly predictable manner. It is the change from one stage to another that places a demand on the family and individuals to be flexible and adaptive in order to negotiate the transition with maximum benefits rather than stress.

Change, implies either a **gain** or a **loss**. For example, a gain may be the birth of a child, or a grandparent moving in. A loss could be a child leaving home or a grandparent dying.

Life cycle events are more likely to be traumatic if they occur "off schedule", eg. early death of a parent, marrying early, birth of a child early in marriage or birth of a child late in marriage, etc.

Let's have a look now at the family life stages and its relationship to marital stress.

The new couple

During courtship the couple are wrapped up in a utopian togetherness, often fairly oblivious of each other's families. They discover there are not only two in the "marital bed" but six or more people! Their spouse is indeed part of a "package deal".

The couple enter the marriage with values, rules and ideas about life, largely transmitted down to them via the vertical axis. They have enormous expectations of each other to have many of their own needs fulfilled.

They have to establish ground rules for relating to each other on all kinds of issues, ie. sex, friends, family, eating habits, etc. A simple issue of toothpaste, can provide a symbolic battleground for sorting out power struggles, values around wasting, sharing, neatness, etc. The contents, ie. issues being dealt with in a crisis, are not nearly as important as the underlying processes.

Crises are more likely to occur at this stage of marriage under the following conditions:

- Large differences in social, economic, religious and educational background.
- Unresolved issues with family of origin, especially unresolved dependency needs.
- Marrying before 20 and after 30 years.
- Pregnancy prior to marriage.
- If one or both spouses have experienced disruption or break-ups in their own family of origin.

The family with young children

This is a major nodal event, and has potential to stimulate growth in the family system and to cause dysfunction. By far the majority of divorces that occur, occur in the first eight years of marriage, ie. in the early childhood period.

While they were without children, the couple can strive for self-realisation and can pursue careers as well as find time to nurture one another. When a child enters the system they have to adjust to less time with each other and for themselves. The husband may feel pushed out by an over-involved mother-child dyad.



By far the majority of divorces occur during the first eight years of marriage



A vicious cycle may ensue with the mother feeling isolated and unsupported, she may, in turn, move closer towards her child, the father may feel more left out and withdraw towards work, friends, alcohol or a mistress.

The mother may also be struggling with

feelings of resentment for having lost her independence, etc. The struggle between the couple may begin to involve the developing child, he may then develop a problem or symptom which further stresses the marital system. With the breakdown of the extended family, young couples are deprived of help from the in-laws and siblings who could act as a buffer system.

III A family with adolescents

This stage, like all the other stages, can be exciting for a well-functioning, flexible unit. The marital couple can enjoy the adolescent intensity, rebelliousness and can be rejuvenated in a sense, by having a greater contact of the outside, modern world.

If the family is not able to be flexible and make allowances for outside influences, the adolescent may well begin to rebel and test the very strength of the couple's relationship.

This stage has much potential for crisis, not only because the adolescent is in a state of flux, but also because the marital couple are generally facing their own mid-life crisis.

Also, the adolescent's grandparents are coping with retirement, possible illness, etc, which in turn puts pressure on the adolescent's parents, and the adolescent.

As in other stages of the family life-cycle, vertical influences play a part, ie. grandparents may criticise their children for their permissiveness with their adolescent.

Parents own feelings about their own adolescence may be evoked at this time and cause conflict in the marriage. For example, a father who, as a teenager had many sexual escapades, is now fearful that his daughter could do the same. He becomes almost dictatorial. Mother is more permissive and disagrees with father. Mother and daughter form a coalition against father and the battle begins.

IV Launching children, the post-parenting stage

This stage spans from the mid-forties to the mid-sixties or it is the stage when the first child leaves home to when the last child leaves home. Divorce is not uncommon at this stage where parents have stayed together for the sake of their children until they have left the home, in order to divorce.

At this stage there is less investment in the parenting role. The mother may experience a loss and emptiness which could result in depression and withdrawal. This could precipitate a crisis, especially where the father is moving ahead in his career and is unsupportive.

Alternatively, the mother may experience herself now as free to pursue a career of her own. If she is successful this could change the balance in the marriage, particularly if the husband has reached a

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