

Supporting young people through crisis moments

Mental Health Awareness Day 2019



When a young person with mental health or wellbeing issues faces a crisis moment, there are some simple techniques and ideas that could help.

Crisis moments are those moments when everything feels overwhelming and simply too much – for some young people this might be the moment when they feel overcome by aggression and the urge to hurt themselves (or others).

These “big” moments feel impossible at the time, but with support and by learning a range of practical strategies, young people can learn to work through the first few minutes, giving their bodies and minds time to calm to a point where they feel more able to continue with their lesson/day. Students have said the most important thing at this time is for an adult to validate how they are feeling.

At these times, students can be sent to the School Hub for Safeguarding & Wellbeing, please see attached poster for a detailed of interventions offered.

Below are also some strategies mentioned which you can do to help some young people through difficult times, though none of them will work for everyone, so be prepared for a little trial and error.

Sixty-second timer

Sometimes, literally giving young people a minute can help. The thought of the next hour or the whole day can be too much, but just getting through one minute might feel more achievable. A simple sand timer or a timer on a watch or phone could help. You can add additional minutes if needed, always just taking things one minute at a time.

Count to 100

This works similarly to the minute timer, but instead the young person can count to 100 or 1,000. This can be done anywhere, anytime without anyone knowing it is happening. Sometimes it is helpful to make this a little more challenging so it offers more distraction from difficult thoughts and feelings – this can be easily done by counting backwards or in a different language.

Another variation is suggesting that the young person counts 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 i.e. he can think of 5 things he can see, 4 things he can hear, 3 things he can touch, 2 things he can taste – this can offer a compassionate response to calming immediate issues.

Recite timestables

Some young people I have spoken with like to pass through difficult minutes by reciting their timestables rather than counting. The rhythm of repetition can feel quite comforting. Reciting verbs they have learnt in a foreign language or a poem they have learnt by heart could also achieve the same feeling of familiarity and comfort as a difficult time passes.

Listen to a song / or watch a video (in their free time)

Music can be a great way to flip our feelings and having a song that is our ‘go-to when things feel tough’ can be very helpful. Different songs suit different young persons, as it depends on what kind of feelings they are struggling with and what kind of music they like. Some young people benefit from music that calms while others might need something upbeat and happy. Any song can help, as it is partly just about the passage of time, but there is something especially comforting about hearing a familiar song that they know has helped them get through difficult moments before.

Similarly, watching a familiar video on YouTube can be a helpful distraction and can help occupy our minds when our heads are full of difficult thoughts and feelings. Some students, choose to create a playlist of videos they find calming and comforting to watch during crisis moments.

Read a page of a book

Reading occupies our mind and can help to distract us from whatever is preying on it. It does not have to be a book – we could read whatever we have to hand – but reading something that we are especially interested in can help to absorb us and enable the time to pass more swiftly.

Stretch every finger and toe in turn

Some people begin to feel quite distant when they are distressed, so simple grounding strategies can help them to feel more connected to the world around them. Very simple things like stretching, clenching and wiggling every finger and toe in turn can help us to feel more connected with our bodies.

Unlace and relace your shoes

One young person I worked with recently said that when he felt the urge to self-harm he would go to the toilets and unlace and replace his shoes before he did anything else. He had learnt that the time this took was long enough for him to calm down enough to put his broader safety planning in place.

Conclusion

There are no right and wrong answers – it is about being flexible and open to trying new things. Everything is worth trying once. You might use these ideas to support a young person through a crisis moment. Or they could simply carry a card or a note in their planner/on their phone with a few of these ideas to help them at difficult times.

Good Mental Health Matters. We are all a little broken, but last time I checked broken crayons still colour the same (Trent Shelton CEO and Founder of Rehab Time Organization 2019)