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When crises affect our health

The death of a loved one, divorce, losing a job – one of these critical life events can affect every one of us sooner or later. People need the right support to ensure that their health does not suffer long-term harm after an event of this kind.



Natural disasters such as floods are among the events that can trigger trauma in people.

Critical life events can throw us off balance, turn our lives upside-down and disrupt our routines. They can have serious repercussions on our health, cause anxiety and depression, and can intensify and prolong existing medical conditions. The Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) has a long-standing focus on this subject and on the effects of crises on people's health. The FOPH has incorporated this issue into many measures and strategies, among them the Strategy for the Prevention of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD), the addiction strategy, measures relating to mental health and the action plan on suicide prevention.

In this issue of spectra we look at people's health throughout their lifetime, the events that can have a lasting impact on our health and at strategies for coping with these events. The good news is that, although we all experience several critical events in the course of our lives, very few people suffer lasting harm as a result. Humans have developed protective mechanisms that enable them to cope with events of this kind and to grow as a result of them.

Events that traumatise

What is a critical life event? In addition to the examples mentioned before, events that can traumatise people also include physical violence, rape, sexual abuse in childhood and, in broader terms, also economic crises, war, natural disasters such as floods or a pandemic.

The risk of long-term damage to body and mind increases particularly if traumatic events take

place over an extended period of time or repeatedly, leaving the affected person feeling powerless and unable to do anything about it. Unemployment illustrates this situation well. Studies show that unemployed people have poorer health and that their health declines the longer they are unemployed.

This was the background against which the FOPH commissioned a study in 2020 to look at the effects of this type of event on the health of the Swiss population. Dario Spini, a professor at the University of Lausanne, and his team compiled a total of 94 studies and

then analysed the effects that events such as starting a first job, the birth of a child or retirement have on alcohol and tobacco consumption, on physical activity and on body weight.

Spini's study documents some known effects, such as that people in a relationship live more healthily because they generally drink less alcohol and smoke less. But some rather surprising effects also emerged, for example that involuntary retirement can have a negative impact on alcohol and tobacco consumption.

Learn at a young age to handle crises

People cope with a traumatic event in different ways. Scientists have identified a number of factors that help us to overcome a crisis more successfully. These protective factors include, for example, learning at a young age to handle crises. A

Studies of social support show that people who have a good network can be sure of getting support in a crisis situation.

person who has managed crises successfully in childhood or adolescence is better equipped to handle the next crisis. This experience acts like a vaccine, reinforcing that person's resilience (resilience is a per-

son's ability to adapt to new situations; it describes a person's robustness).

Another important protective factor is social support. This includes the ability to seek and also accept help. At the same time it also means a person's environment, family and friends who provide support, and also an employer who is willing to work with the person to find a temporary solution in a crisis. There are different types of social support, such as instrumental support, i.e. practical assistance in the form of doing someone's shopping or driving them to appointments. Social support also includes emotional support, providing comfort and cheering a person up, or providing information (explaining where they can get help).

Studies of social support show that people who have a good network, who are part of a system of giving and taking, have demonstrably better health opportunities and can be sure of getting support in a crisis situation.

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Links:
– Link to study by Dario Spini
<https://tinyurl.com/3d5jyapw>
– Promotion of self-management
<https://tinyurl.com/2hxnkntkj>

Summary of the effects of the main life events on health-related high-risk behaviours

	Physical activity	Weight/BMI	Alcohol	Smoking	Drugs	Key
Starting university (the initial years)	↘•	↗ ♂ ♀	↗	?•	?•	
Graduating from university	≈•	?•	?•	?•	?•	
Employment	≈•	↗• full-time ↘• part-time	↗ ♂ quantity ↘ ♀ quantity ↗ ♂ ♀ frequency	↘ ♀ ?• ♂	?•	
Unemployment / job loss	?•	↗•	↗•	↗• ?• ♂	↗•	
Marriage / living together	↗ ♂ ↘ ♀	↗ ♂ ♀	↘ ♂ ♀	≈ ♂ ↘ ♀	↘•	
Separation/divorce	↗ ? ♀	↘ ♂ ♀	↗•	↗•	↗•	
Parenting and pregnancy	↘ ♂ ♀	↗•	↘• ♀ ≈ ♂	↘ ♀ ? ♂	↘ ♀ ? ♂	
Voluntary retirement	↗• ♂ ♀	↘ ♂ ↗ ♀	↗• ♂ ♀	?• ↘ ♀	?•	
Involuntary retirement	↘•	?•	↗•	↗•	?•	

Source: Spini et al., 2020.

The challenging transition from couple to family

The act of starting a family is usually associated with a sense of meaning and happiness. But it is easy to forget that the transition from couple to family is also a critical life event. The mental health of the parents is decisive for the child's development both before and after birth. It is therefore important to seek help if problems such as depressive symptoms occur.

The life of the mother and father and their relationship to each other undergo a fundamental change after the birth of a child. The need to be available for their own child around the clock can severely limit their independence, thus imposing a considerable physical and mental burden. These facts are often not discussed beforehand – the emphasis tends to be on joyful anticipation of the birth – and this can increase people's reluctance to seek help at an early stage.

A delicate transition for new parents

The parents' well-being has a significant impact on the health and development of the child. However, roughly thirty per cent of women¹ have mild, moderate or severe symptoms of depression after giving birth, develop anxiety or suffer from stress – and it is not uncommon for fathers to be affected by these symptoms too. It often costs new parents a great deal of effort to seek help in these situations, because the pressure from society is enormous. Barbara Blatter Hofmann, a MAS-qualified midwife and nursing expert in the Department of Paediatric and Adolescent Medicine at Cantonal Hospital Winterthur, notes: "It impresses me time and again to see how women simply go on functioning despite having postpartum depression or anxiety. However, the infant notices that its mother is not well. If the mother or father has an untreated psychiatric condition, this can endanger the child's development and increase the risk of behavioural disorders. That's why this type of symptom must be addressed as soon as possible."

If a mother-to-be is suffering from a trauma, depression or severe stress, it can trigger a premature birth or affect the development of the fetal brain. This, in turn, can lead to long-term complications in the child – for example in its cognition or speech – which is why it's important for pregnant women to seek help promptly if they have mental health problems.

It is equally essential for women who develop depression or anxiety before or during pregnancy to have a good social environment and professional support.

A good relationship creates a positive climate for newborns

Children don't just change their parents' lives; they also affect the relationship between the couple. As responsibilities towards the new baby increase, satisfaction and affection between the parents often decrease at the same time. The causes range from time constraints through lack of support, lack of sleep and declining sexual activity. It is therefore important for couples to find time for themselves during this period and talk about their expectations and wishes.



The birth of a child is a critical life event that entails major changes.

The degree to which the birth of a child affects a couple's relationship also depends on the division of roles. The framework conditions for parents have improved somewhat in recent years owing, for example, to the introduction of a two-week period of parental leave for fathers. Compared with other countries, though, Switzerland is still lagging behind in terms of childcare and, according to UNICEF, is at the bottom of the international ranking, alongside the USA, Cyprus, Slovakia and Australia. If both parents are working full-time before the child is born, it is usually the woman who subsequently reduces her hours or takes a break from work, while the father tends to continue working as before. This often re-establishes a traditional division of roles in the household, which can generate dissatisfaction, despite fathers nowadays tending to play a more active role within the family than was usual ten years ago.

The transition from couple to family is a challenging phase of development for everyone concerned. It is therefore important for professionals to draw young parents' attention to the help available – for example, the support provided by midwives, and counselling services for families, mothers and fathers. Ultimately, satisfied parents, a stable relationship, good parenting skills and a positive climate within the family all have a positive effect on the child's mental health.

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Links:

- Short films about starting a family – a vulnerable phase: <https://tinyurl.com/s5awdyv8>
- Information, tips and resources relating to mental health and parenting: <https://tinyurl.com/26yhsjht>
- University of Zurich conference on starting a family – a vulnerable phase: <https://tinyurl.com/4vrds9yy>
- Alliance Enfance website: <https://www.alliance-enfance.ch>
- UNICEF press release dated 18 June 2021 on childcare in Switzerland: <https://tinyurl.com/4nch5794>

¹ Miller, Pallant, Negri, 2006. Anxiety and stress in the postpartum: Is there more to postnatal distress than depression? <https://tinyurl.com/n4aukt8e>

At first hand



Eva Bruhin
Head of Prevention Strategies Section

Crises can be the foundation for growth

Crises are a part of life. For example, sooner or later we will all be confronted with the death of someone close to us. After a traumatic experience, many people go through a phase in which they ask themselves, "How can I possibly cope with it all?" Phases in which they might reach for a glass of something or a medication to see them through. Crises often go hand in hand with anxiety, sleep problems, loss of appetite, depression.

Crises can make us into the person we are

But personal crises are also an opportunity; they can help us to develop and grow. Crises can make us into the person we are.

People with a positive attitude to life who are receptive to change and new experiences, or those who are very resilient and can draw on sufficient resources are better able to handle crises. As are people who seek help when they need it and use the crisis as an opportunity to change their lives. Some people appreciate their lives more after a crisis. They identify new strengths in themselves and look for new goals and tasks.

Critical life events can unleash positive things

I would like to emphasise that critical life events are not only negative, however, because they can also unleash many positive things and even a sense of joy. When we become parents or start a new job, this event can of course have negative consequences; the birth of a child can lead to a lack of sleep and depression, a new job can unleash a fear of failing. But we usually also derive a great deal of strength and joy from a birth or from the new challenge at work.

“Crises are turning points in a person’s biography, both negative and positive”

5 questions for Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello. The developmental psychologist and psychotherapist explains why crises are always an opportunity as well, how resilience develops and why loneliness must become a public health issue.

1 Can you give us some typical examples of critical life events?

These are events associated with acute stress that lead to the person being overwhelmed (though usually only for a time). Crises are generally turning points in a person’s biography. Retirement, serious illness, divorce or the loss of a spouse are challenges that require a person to make considerable adjustments. Crises force a person to redefine themselves and to reorganise their life. At the same time, the word crisis originates from the Greek “krisis”, which also means “decision”. To me, this means that a crisis is not in itself a bad thing, rather that it can have either a negative or a positive outcome.

2 Why do people respond differently to crises? Why do some despair while others grow as a person?

Basically two factors determine how a person responds to a crisis. One is naturally the people around us – the degree of support provided by family and friends. At the same time, a person’s reaction also depends on the structure of their personality. An open, friendly and curious person often finds it easier to adapt to new situations than a person who anxiously seeks security in their routine. The results of studies show that the majority of people manage crises well. Around one third are crisis-resistant or mentally resilient. Around half are initially thrown off balance but adapt to the new situation over a period of about two years. Only a minority – roughly ten to twenty per cent, depending on the event – never recover.

3 People say that “time is a great healer”. What actually happens inside a person?

A person who experiences a crisis or arrives at a turning point in their biography has to adapt mentally and adjust to a new situation. This process of adaptation takes time. The person needs not only to let go and say goodbye – for example to a job that for many years has defined their identity, or to a beloved one who has died. They also need to find a new identity and develop new day-to-day routines. Scientists used to assume that these different phases of the mourning or adapta-

tion process happened one after the other. But current approaches are moving away from this sequential logic. The dual process model, for example, identifies two forces that come into play. Loss orientation processes the individual’s grief, restoration orientation provides distraction. When we process a loss, we oscillate constantly be-

“Men usually suffer far more from loneliness and the associated negative impact on their health. Loneliness is unfortunately a taboo subject in our society.”

tween these two positions. Most people are initially more loss-oriented – and as time passes, restoration orientation becomes increasingly important.

4 What do you mean when you refer to a “crisis as an opportunity”?

Resilience develops through resistance. Many people just plod through life. They don’t activate their resources until a stressful situation occurs. At the same time, though, this means that they don’t become aware of their strengths until a crisis happens. Many people also report that they have learned from crises that they have survived – and are now living life more intensively, for example, or experiencing greater gratitude. The temporary feeling of being overwhelmed in a crisis is often the beginning of personal growth.

5 What factors contribute to overcoming a crisis?

In addition to a supportive social environment, strength of character – for example in the form of receptiveness, humour, gratitude or empathy – plays a major and primary role. These strengths are not predetermined; they can be trained. This is why mental resilience can also be learned to a certain extent – and promoted through targeted offerings. Individual differences need to be borne in mind. Research has shown, for example, that men find it more difficult than women to ask for support from the people around them after the loss of a partner. They usually suffer far



Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello, Emeritus Honorary Professor, President of the University of the Third Age in Bern

more from loneliness and the associated negative impact on their health. Loneliness is unfortunately a taboo subject in our society. Loneliness must become a public health concern, and all the more so since it is becoming more common in today’s individualistic society and is affecting a growing number of people. This is why effective prevention also takes the societal framework into account, and enables people to participate in society through mobility services and leisure activities.

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