



## Tips for Managing the Crisis of the Week (COW)

Ever have a session where a caregiver or client presents with a COW or a Crisis of the Week?

The session may have barely begun before a caregiver launches in on describing misbehaviors and infractions the child did over the past week? Or a teen client wants to spend the session filling you in on the latest drama or conflict with peers or family. COWs can derail providers off the evidence-based practice agenda and delay improvement in functioning.

There are many reasons why clients bring up COW's. Probably the main one is that clients find it helpful to share and get support about stressful experiences and outside stressors. Another common reason is to avoid addressing the mental health conditions or functioning problems in a direct way. Focusing on problems in the environment and venting is easier than facing up and taking steps to learn and use new skills. Avoidance can be a specific driver in cases of PTSD or anxiety because EBPs involve facing up to the unreasonable fears. This is always hard. Clients or caregivers may not be comfortable with structured sessions and solution oriented therapy because their lives involve lurching from crisis to crisis, or their previous counseling experiences have been non-specific and primarily reactive and supportive.

It is perfectly normal to want a supportive listener after a stressful or upsetting experience. And there will be circumstances where simply listening and supporting for a part of a session is perfectly reasonable. However, as an EBP provider, you must make a choice about how to be most helpful when presented with a COW. Do you listen to the problem for most of the session or structure the amount and timing for the venting and support seeking? Do you find a way to steer them back to the EBP you are delivering? Do you apply CBT principles and skills to COWs to generalize the CBT skills (e.g., triangle, FBA, problem solving, etc.).

To help make this choice, it is important to be able to differentiate between what is a true crisis and what is a COW. Learning the difference between these two is an important strategy for caregivers and clients as well.

### **Crisis**

- Safety threats to self, others, property that need immediate attention
- Caregiver/client is overwhelmed and the high level of distress is interfering with functioning
- Recent loss or other significant life event (e.g., death in the family, sudden homelessness)

### **COW**

- No immediate threats to safety
- Stressful but not overwhelming

## What to Do

1. The only reason not to go ahead with your prepared structure for a session is if there is a real crisis.
2. At the start of treatment, prepare caregivers and clients for structured sessions. If they have had prior counseling experiences that were mainly supportive, non-specific therapy, this will be new to them.
3. Many of our clients live in very stressful contexts. Many of the sources of distress are beyond their control. We cannot control most of these environmental sources of stress either. Our contribution is to improve emotional and behavioral problems through teaching skills so that children and families can more effectively function even in tough contexts.

## Getting back on track

- If the caregiver or client starts to get off track, it's up to you to bring them back. "What you have to say is important and we'll have time to talk about that later. Let's return to what we are working on."
- Name the COW. "You want to talk about Johnny's misbehavior this week."
- Explore and normalize reason behind COWs (avoidance, uncomfortable with structure etc.). "It's normal to want to focus on what seems like the biggest problem at the moment, however the best way to see change is by sticking with our work."
- Structure sessions that address client concerns without derailing EBP work. For example, set aside 5-10 minutes at the end of session.
- Milk the COW. How can you apply learned skills to help client address the situation?
- Start each session with a relaxation or grounding exercise that helps focus the client.
- Gradually expose caregivers/clients to the attention and pacing of a structured session.
- Write session agenda on a whiteboard and keep referring to it as needed.