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**STRESS
AND ITS EFFECTS
ON DECISION
MAKING**

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Submitted in fulfillment for the requirements
of the Honors Capstone

University Honors Program
Northern Illinois University

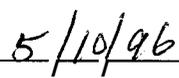
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What is decision-making? Webster(1986) defined a decision as: the act of deciding or settling a dispute or question by giving a judgment; the act of making up one's mind; a judgment of conclusion given; firmness of mind. One re-occurring word in these definitions is "judgment". Is the decision-maker in the right frame of mind to have good judgment? The question may be; what can happen to a person to cloud his/her judgment? One thing that may lead to poor judgment in decision making is stress, or a crisis.

The terms stress and crisis are often used interchangeably; however, they are not the same. So, what is a crisis? Webster's gives one definition, stating that a crisis is: "An emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life; an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome." (Webster's, 1986, p. 307) W.I. Thomas, the social theorist, saw crisis as: "A catalyst that disturbs old habits, evokes new responses, and becomes a major factor in charting new developments ..." (Rapoport, 1962, p. 23).

How does a state of crisis come to exist? There are three factors that can produce a state of crisis: (1) a hazardous event which poses some threat; (2) a threat to instinctual need which is symbolically linked to earlier threats that resulted in vulnerability or conflict; (3) an inability to respond to either of the first two factors with adequate coping mechanisms" (Rapoport, 1962, p. 25).

I have studied Rapoport's writings, and I will try to summarize the stages and definitions of a crisis. There are two characteristics of the state of crisis. The first important characteristic of a crisis is that it is self-limiting. What I mean is that the crisis will not continue indefinitely. The second characteristic of a crisis is the phases of the crisis. We will call the phases the beginning, middle, and the end for simplicity. In the beginning or the initial phase, there is a rise in tension in response to the initial impact of stress. This stress is obviously caused because of the occurrence of the crisis. During this period the person's problem solving mechanisms are called on to try to resolve the crisis. If the crisis is not resolved quickly the person will try to re-define the problem in order to achieve satisfaction that has been resolved. The middle phase is the period of recoil. During this period the person may become weakened physically and emotionally. The person may fold or crack under the pressure of all that has happened. The third phase is the post-traumatic period. During this phase the person reflects on all that has happened and revisits all that he/she has gone through. Any time in the future that the person encounters a situation that is similar in anyway to this crisis, he/she will associate the old crisis with the new situation creating even higher levels of stress. (Rapoport, 1962)

The question that now comes to light is: does stress cause a crisis or does a crisis lead to stress? If my interpretation of

the authors statements are correct, a crisis as defined above leads to stress. It is apparent that stress becomes a factor in phase one of the crisis. In the beginning phase, the person experiences an increase in tension in response to the stress. It seems only logical that this increase in tension in relation to the stress is a direct response to the crisis. Additional stress comes into play if the person is unable to resolve the crisis. The individual's stress level is also heightened during a new crisis, due to the hardships of reliving the old crisis.

In today's society, many events could be perceived as stressful. How often do you talk to someone who doesn't have something going on in their life that he/she is perceiving as stressful. Whether at school, work, or home, problems relating to stress seem to be all-pervasive and affect all age groups. However, what is stress? Rice(1992) defined stress as "any event or environmental stimulus that causes a person to feel tense or aroused; the internal mental state of tension or arousal; or the body's physical reaction to demand or damaging intrusions" (p.6). Stress is not always a negative entity; sometimes we act well under pressure, and sometimes not. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus mainly on decision-making under stress, or in a crisis situation. Often times, the stress we feel is related to a decision we are facing. The question then becomes, how do we as individuals handle stress in our decision-making? Even though it is the crisis that causes the stress within us; it is our perceptions of the crisis that determine how high the stress will become. I will examine some crisis situations that lead to

stress filled decision-making for individuals in the public and private sectors.

"How could I have been so stupid?" President John F. Kennedy asked, after realizing how badly he had miscalculated when he approved the Bay of Pigs invasion. All people ask themselves the same question each time they are confronted with their own personal "Bay of Pigs". Why do people so often fail to look at all of the available alternatives with care, particularly when vital consequences of their decisions are at stake? Under what conditions are they most likely to do such a poor job of appraising the consequences that they head straight for disaster? (Janis, 1977) The answer is, during times of perceived stressful situations. When we perceive a decision that needs to be made as critical, decision-making becomes stressful. Otto Lerbinger(1986) communications scholar, said that "decision-making under crisis-induced stress does not have to be difficult. Stress can be controlled, and the level of achievement in decision making during a crisis can be improved. Managing a crisis is managing decisions"(p. 133).

When we speak of stressful decision-making, we are not referring to the endless minor decisions a person faces when going to Blockbuster or McDonalds or which road to take to mother's. I am referring to decisions that are generally big in nature; decisions made by our pr-es-i-dent.s and other leaders, and decisions that have a great deal of influence on our personal lives.

Janis (1977) described five stages of decision-making.

"Stage one is apprising the challenge. Are the risks serious? Stage two is surveying the alternatives. Stage three is weighing the alternatives. Stage four is deliberating about commitment; Who shall I let know? Stage five is adhering to the crisis at hand, despite negative feedback; how serious are the risks if I do or do not do something" (p. 172).

Allison (1971) held that a nation's foreign policy reflects rational and purposive behavior. Decision makers react to the threats and opportunities arising on the international scene by formulating a number of options and submitting them to a cost-benefit analysis. The President and his advisors then selects the policy option that provides the maximum payoff in terms of the nation's goals and objectives. (Vanderbroucke, 1984)

Therefore, we must assume that President Kennedy's decision with respect to the Bay of Pigs represented a coherent value, maximizing choice.

In the Bay of pigs decision, a crisis was apparent, and a stress-related decision had to be made by President Kennedy. The Bay of pigs posed a threat which could result in conflict. This situation is also self-limiting, and as you will read, and did go from beginning to end as the definition of a state of crisis is explained. President John F. Kennedy had to make a decision, and whether it was good or bad, he made one. First, we must look at Stage one; is there a problem? In 1961 the cold war was on the minds of our leaders and dominated international affairs

(Higgins, 1987). It seemed that the United States was not winning. The Soviet Union indicated they may intervene in the Congo, and Communist forces were set to take over Laos (Higgins, 1987). However, Cuba, only 90 miles from United States shores, posed a greater threat to our security. The tension was building in the U.S., and President Kennedy, feeling these tensions, was forced to act. Seeing that there is an obvious threat, it is apparent that there was a crisis (Vanderbroucke, 1984)

Stage two is surveying the alternatives. Kennedy needed to make a solid decision that would maintain the U.S. image and be acceptable to the public. His choices ranged from gun boat diplomacy and isolation of Cuba to helping the Cuban underground and Cuban exiles in implementing a plan set-up by Dwight D. Eisenhower (Vanderbroucke, 1984)

Stage three is weighing the alternatives. Gun boat diplomacy and isolation of Cuba would be highly noticeable. These tactics could leave the US's image slightly tarnished. However, privately training and funding an underground group and enacting psychological warfare which the U.S. had been successful with in Guatemala, would be less visible. Also, the U.S. could simply deny any allegations because there would be no proof, so President Kennedy and his advisors thought (Vanderbroucke, 1984).

Stage four is deliberating.. Kennedy deliberated and made the decision to proceed. The exiles were trained in guerrilla warfare, armed, and dropped on the shores of Cuba. The mission

was a miserable failure, most of the exiles were killed or captured, and it was obvious that the **U.S.** was behind it. There were several problems with the president and his advisors decision-making process (Vanderbroucke, 1984).

First problem is that Guatemala and Cuba are two completely different countries. The President and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) should not have expected that just because psychological warfare worked in Guatemala that it would have worked in Cuba (Vanderbroucke, 1984). President Kennedy and his advisors did not take into account that Castro was smart enough to pay attention to history and be prepared to counter such a plan. Castro was indeed ready and had already taken measures to counter this type of warfare. Secondly, failure in Kennedy's decision-making was with the strength of the CIA. Why did the CIA assume that they could better train exiles in guerrilla warfare than an army of 200,000 soldiers who practically lived guerrilla warfare all of their lives (Vanderbroucke, 1984). Thirdly, it was not rational thinking to expect that the **U.S.** could deny involvement in the invasion and escape international exposure. Finally, President Kennedy did not study carefully enough the plan that Dwight D. Eisenhower had dedicated numerous resources to already. This plan was to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro (Vanderbroucke, 1984). Eisenhower's plan had been thought out well, and in the opinion of this writer would have been the best plan of action. However, Kennedy's advisors did not think that using the opposing parties ideas would look good

for Kennedy. Based on the four mentioned criticisms, it is my opinion that Kennedy's administration failed in stage three of Janis decision-making concerns. This failure was due to the crisis situation that lead up to the Bay of Pigs; therefore, Kennedy and his advisors were under stress to come up with a plan in a timely fashion and failed to weigh all the alternatives.

For stage five, Government officials and leaders were torn on what should be done; however, Kennedy did adhere to his decision. It is obvious that a decision needed to be made. The US's risks were worthy of a decision. In regards to the Bay of pigs and Kennedy's decision, I feel that he faced many stresses in his decision-making. He was faced with being a young inexperienced president. He was faced with keeping the good image of the U.S. Finally, I feel he faced tremendous political stress. Although Eisenhower's plan might have been the best one, I do not think that Kennedy could have followed through with it due to political pressures. Kennedy's inability to make a good decision under stress in that situation led to humiliation and failure for the U.S. (Vanderbroucke, 1984)

President Kennedy was involved in another political crisis in 1962. The Cuban Missile crisis gave way to another tough decision for Kennedy. "It was confirmed that the Soviet union had placed missiles in Cuba which were strategically placed for an attack on the United States" .(Pear, 1992, AS). Kennedy made a bold decision and ordered Niikita Khrushhev and the Soviet union to remove all Soviet weapons from Cuba. In taking this stance

and bringing the U.S. within minutes of a nuclear war where millions of innocent people could have died, definitely qualifies as a crisis. There was no agreements to be made nor any discussions to be scheduled. Kennedy was holding firmly to his decision and ordered a Naval quarantine of Cuba. Although I am not sure if this is consistent with what he wanted the Soviet union to do, it was another stress-related decision. The American people were terrified because we were as close as we had ever come to being involved in a nuclear war. Luckily, the Soviet Union backed down and adhered to the demands, but things could have turned out differently (Allison, 1971).

The energy crisis in 1973, during the Nixon administration, is another example of why the best decisions are not always made under stress. Even though the threat was very real, it was not posing an immediate threat, but it was obvious that this crisis was about to take shape. Seeing that there would be a crisis, Nixon and his advisors began to feel the stress. There were many signs that a problem was escalating, yet the Nixon administration did not heed the warnings that were received. Janis (1977) referred to this as Defensive Avoidance. Defensive Avoidance is: "the disinclination of people to think about potential unpleasantness until it can no longer be avoided" (Janis, 1977, p. 40). So, even though the Nixon administration knew of the problem, it was simply avoided until it became a crisis. Nixon and his staff decided to look the other way instead of facing the problem head on. Janis (1977) followed up by saying that often

people are inclined to avoid bad news and hold the attitude that it can not happen here, or to me. There were many courses of action that the Nixon administration could have taken to make some sort of start on heading off the energy problem. However, none of the actions were popular. Therefore, the Nixon administration looked at all the options and decided that the best action to take was none at all. By doing this they avoided doing anything that the public might view as a negative course of action.

Another prime example of poor decision making due to avoidance came during World War II; the Pearl Harbor incident to be exact. Admiral Kimmel received many warnings that war with Japan was imminent. warnings of war do pose a threat, and war is, in its simplest form, a conflict. What truly makes this a crisis, is Admiral Kimmel's inability to respond with adequate coping mechanisms. Admiral Kimmel received warnings on November 24th and 27th that it was highly likely that Japan was going to be making a surprise attack somewhere on the U.S. Even though Pearl Harbor would be a prime location, Admiral Kimmel and his staff refused to believe that Pearl Harbor was a target. They assumed that everyone else was a target. Admiral Kimmel continued to give peacetime weekend leave for soldiers and left the majority of their ships docked like sitting ducks. On December 3, 1941 Admiral Kimmel received another warning that a Japanese strike was soon coming, but continued to believe that it wouldn't be in his direction. On December 7, 1941 Japan dealt a

crushing blow to the **U.S.** with their attack on Pearl Harbor. Nineteen ships were sunk, and 2,340 lives lost. Admiral Kimmel's decision to ignore several warnings gave way to poor decision-making under stress. Imminent war is very stressful; that is understandable. However, poor decisions, one after another, are not. The reason this situation went as far as it did is because Admiral Kimmel did not feel that increase in tension that this crisis should have evoked within him. Had he taken this crisis situation with more seriousness, the situation may have been much smaller in scope, or even avoided.

I would also like to look at some crisis situations on a more personal level. Let's look at death. Is death a crisis? Well, death is an event that may pose different types of threats to a person. Whether it be financially or mentally, death often leaves a person vulnerable to his/her own emotions. Also, very often we as human beings are unable to come up with adequate coping mechanisms for death of a loved one. Death is self-limiting, in the sense that, emotions will subside and the trauma will end when we come face to face with death itself. Therefore, death does fit the description of a crisis. Death of a loved one is something that everyone of us will experience at sometime in our lives. Some people can handle the trauma and stress, and some can not. When a parent dies, many people are affected, and many decisions have to be made .. The children are a main concern that the surviving parent must worry about. What will the future hold for the children? Will there be enough money to support the

children? The surviving parent must decide how to continue the children's upbringing. The parent worries about every decision made, and the effects it may have on his/her children's future. All of these crucial decisions do not leave a great deal of time for the parent to mourn the loss of his/her lost spouse, make funeral arrangements, make sure the day to day operations of a household are taken care of, and work to make the extra money that will be needed to support the loss of an income. The surviving parent needs to worry about the expense of services, the mental being of the children, and him/herself. When all of this happens within such a short time, can good decisions be made?

Another personal crisis could be a DUI in a family. The family member, who may be the major provider may lose his/her ability to get to and from work. After a DUI, a person's reputation can become tarnished. The community may frown on that person and the company they work for. There are expenses associated with lawyers, fines, insurance, and a new means of travel. Another twist maybe other parties involved. For instance, what if someone was injured in the accident, be it a passenger in your vehicle or the other driver. If someone is maimed or killed, who is going to pay for damages. With all of these complications piling up, a normal person be expected to make good decisions. Suffering from guilt and/or denial alone is enough to ruin a person thought process. This person's job, reputation and lifestyle are all at stake, while accurate and

timely decisions need to be made. These circumstances are all very possible threats which leave families vulnerable; therefore, a DUI can be a personal crisis.

Let us look at a less personnel and more global event; the nations budget stalemate, and the House and Senate's willingness to shut down the government. The problem has been recognized; however, it is the inability of the Democrats and the Republicans to come to an agreement on the budget; which decides if hundreds of thousands of people will put out of work. This creates a personal crisis for those employees affected by the shut-down of the government. These decision makers are not under financial stress, but they are concerned about re-election, and who will end up being the "bad guy". They have created a crisis, and others feel the far reaching effects of these poor policy makers. The problem is that these leaders are making decisions for the wrong reasons and obviously not in a timely manner. Hundreds of thousands of people stand to be out of work, and, therefore, financially strapped. This idea relates back to my earlier comments on the main provider for a family losing his/her job. These hundreds of thousands of providers are now going to have to be concerned about their mortgages, car payments, children's needs, food, electricity, phone, etc... These things are all very real threats, once again leaving families vulnerable. However, these events are obviously self-limiting, and will come to an end. Also, with an election year approaching, everyone wants to be the good guy, and a situation like this may cause a

personal crisis for these elected officials. In this case, it almost seems that the crisis was caused by poor decision-making, thereby creating stress, and the unavoidable stress burdened decision-making. The House and Senate are not weighing the consequences appropriately. They are more concerned with image than with people's personal lives. They have put their own agenda ahead of the agenda they were elected to take care of. I think we are seeing what Janis (1972) referred to as group think. Both groups are so caught up in image that they "reach a decision before realistically appraising the merits of all available courses of action" (Janis, 1972). It is almost ironic that the ones we have elected to deal with major issues and to prevent crisis's have now created one.

Personal and global crises will be with the people of this world forever. Therefore, decision-making under stress is here to stay. However, it is up to us and our leaders to decide if we are going to make the efforts to make better and more informed decisions under crisis situations. It is up to us if we are going to face these decisions head on or continue to avoid them and say it can't happen to me. Big decisions will continue to be viewed by the people as stressful, and it is up to the individual to follow a set procedure to think through all possibilities and make a good decision. We must try and focus on the important factors in our decisions, and follow a priority list when making those decisions which are important to us. It is also important for the individual to truly look at all perceived stressful

events, and decide whether or not it is really stressful. If we can separate truly desperate situations from the numerous perceived stressors we face, then maybe we will become more effective and successful decision makers.

I have put together a few ideas or steps to follow when faced with a decision that you are perceiving as stressful. First, when the event presents itself, take everything in stride, don't let it get to you. Second, find out as much as you possibly can about the situation. The more information you have, the better chance you have of making an informed decision. Third, think through and write down all of your options. Think each choice out carefully, and write all the detail down so you can refer back to them as often as you like. Fourth, weigh all the pros and cons of each decision. Fifth, make the decision with confidence. If you have followed the first four steps, you should be confident that you have done all you can. Finally, after a short time has past, reflect back on you decision, and make sure that you did all you could, and weighed all the alternatives carefully. You may find that you missed something. The point of this step is to make better decisions each time. These simple steps should be obvious, but be sure to follow each one. Additionally, if you follow a procedure for decision making when an event becomes stressful, stress can turn out to be a positive thing. It can help you to make better decisions. Following these steps does not guarantee a good decision, but it

definitely can not hurt, and over time, you will become a better¹⁶
decision maker.

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