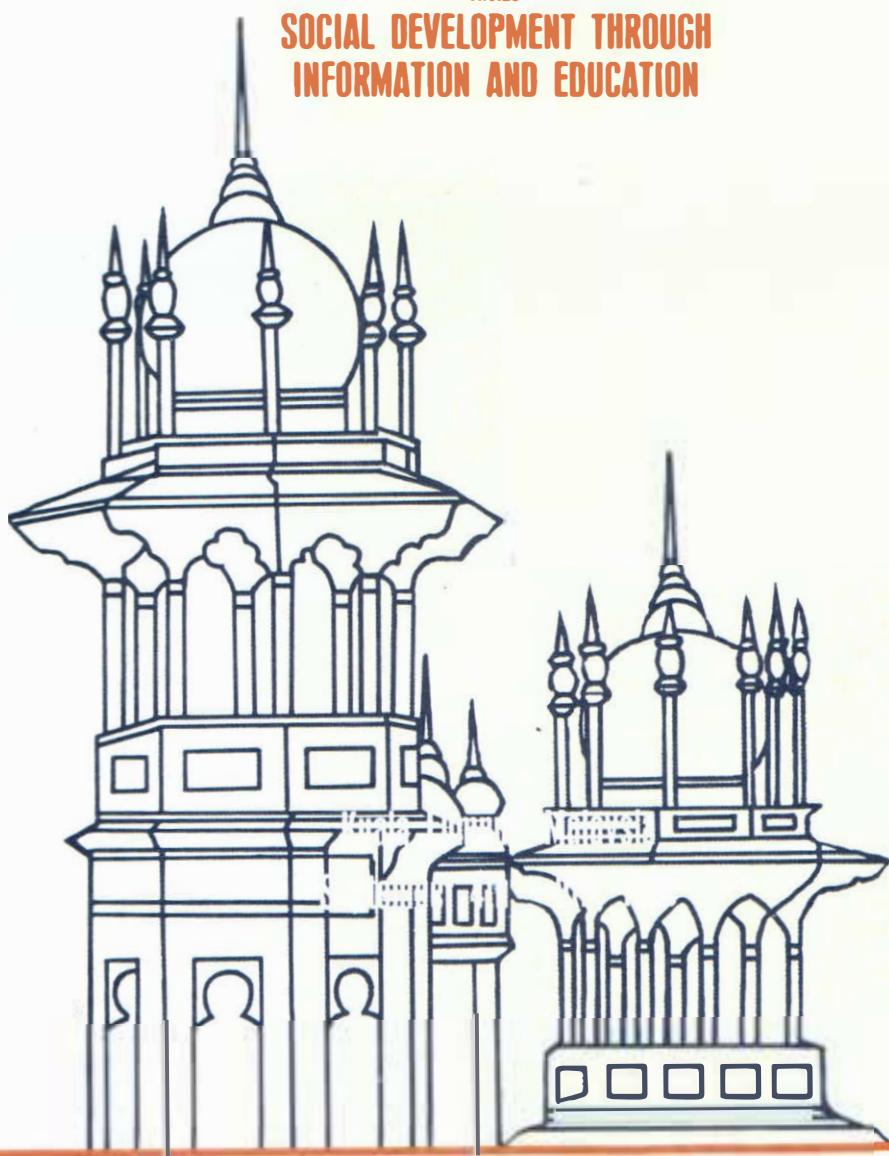




# ASIA & PACIFIC REGIONAL CONFERENCE OF ICSW

*Theme*

**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH  
INFORMATION AND EDUCATION**



A B S T R A C T S

**GERMANY**



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## CRISIS MANAGEMENT: A STUDY OF 500 BIOGRAPHIES 1900–1988

Crisis Management as a Learning Process in Eight Spiral Phases\*

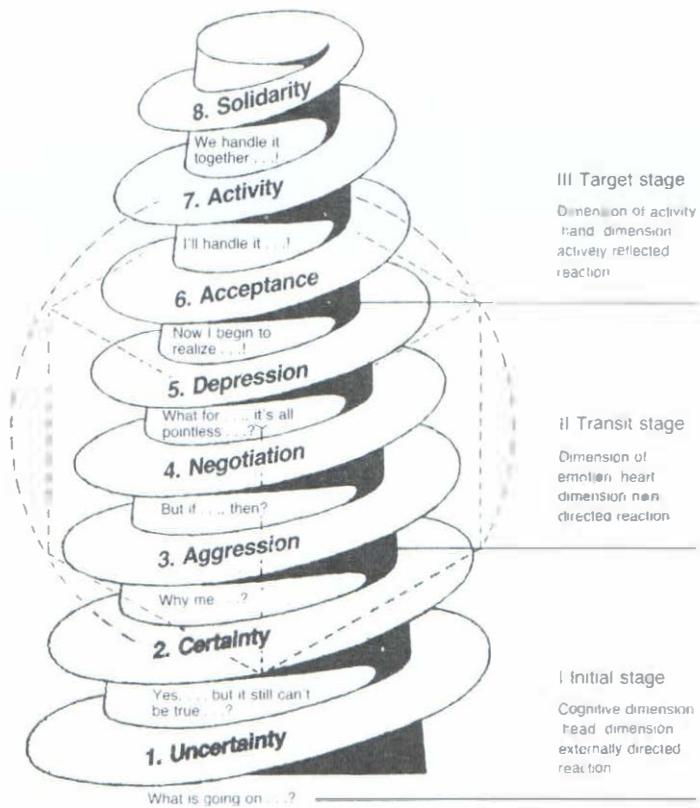


Fig. 5 – Crisis Management as a Learning Process in Eight Spiral Phases.

\* On this, see  
Schuchardt, Erika:

Why is this Happening to Me . . . ?  
Guidance And Hope For Those Who Suffer  
Augsburg/Fortress Publishers, Minneapolis 1990  
Translated in several languages.  
1st German Edition 1981, 5th printing 1989  
Was awarded the German Literature Price 1984

There are a good many studies out by now on learning how to die, for example the works E. Kubler-Ross has written. But I want to answer the question: *How can we learn to live* when confronted by situations that seem hopeless for all affected, that seem to prevent any life beyond pure survival.

Therefore I looked for and analyzed all sorts of stories, biographical, autobiographical, fictional, that had to do with my questions. I ended up with 524 publications, written between 1900 and 1988. (*See fig. I \**).

These are stories told by Europeans and people from other continents (*see fig. II \**), about 100 of them from outside Europe. I studied the lives of people with the so-called classic handicaps as well as the lives of persons suffering from long-term or incurable diseases. And of course, the source material differs as to whether it was written by affected persons themselves or clients (*see fig. III \**).

My study came to the result that there are certain typical patterns that completely correspond to what we call learning processes in the field of education. I want to illustrate these in three steps:

1. The lack of the capacity to interact
2. Coping with crisis as a process of learning
3. Pearl S. Buck: "Beloved Suffering Child" – A case study in crisis management

*(An American autobiographer who live in China)*

Because the space is limited, I only present parts of the 2. point.

## 2. Coping with Crisis as a Process of Learning

In the diagram (*fig. V \*, first edition published 1979*) labeled "The Eight Spiral Phases of the Learning Process of Crisis Management", two main points are illustrated:

Like the process of learning in which we learn to deal with crises, a spiral can continue indefinitely. Hence our choice of this analogy. The learning process can last a whole lifetime, since real experience depends always on our lifelong readiness to learn.

Secondly, the coils of a spiral can lie flatly side by side or else a drawn asunder in a flexible manner, and this is analogous to the way in which, in the process of learning to handle a crisis, individual spiral phases can either coincide with or follow each other, an even build on one another.

To understand the process of learning to handle crisis, it will be helpful if we try for a moment to enter imaginatively into the situation of an affected person when, for example, the doctor tell her or him: 'You have cancer . . .' or 'Paraplegia is the normal outcome of your accident' order 'Your child is physically well but has a mental disability'. The receipt of such a message paralyzes us as if we had been struck by lightning. Unbidden the question poses itself: 'What is really going on . . . ? We are in the first phase of the spiral, that of 'uncertainty'. When the physical symptoms accumulate, however, there are unmistakable reactions from society, the number of medical diagnosis increases, entry on the second phase of the spiral is inescapable: that of 'certainty'. In this phase we try to reassure ourselves with the argument (*oh so familiar!*): 'Yes . . . but it still can't be true . . . ?' All of us know that this 'Yes, but . . .' is tantamount to a straight 'No!' But this is an exact description of our situation at the end of the INITIAL STAGE: our mind, our head, tells us 'It's true' but in our heart deep-down we feel: 'It can't be true, because it shouldn't be true!'

The biographies in question describe graphically here how the learning process in many cases came to an abrupt end at this point. Those of whom this was true needed all their strength all their lives to evade and deny the truth they found so threatening. Often it was simply because they felt themselves utterly on their own and thrown back on their own resources in their efforts to learn how to cope with their crises. They had no one to accompany them and to help them to hang on in this transit stage.

In this TRANSIT STAGE, the intellectually understood message of the head very gradually percolates drop by drop to the emotional reaches of the heart. The consequence is that the emotions which have been bottled up almost to danger point often erupt and fly off almost uncontrollably in all directions. One can easily understand why some affected people, fearing instinctively at this point an uncontrollable outburst of emotion, erect a defensive wall against the insoluble personal problem and prefer to stand still and stagnate in the crash course of crisis management. They find it impossible to restrain the bitter cry.: "Why me, of all people . . . ?"

In the third phase of the spiral, that of 'aggression', the affected person hits out at everything and nothing. Any target will serve (family, friends, colleagues, society) because in actual fact the real target of his aggression is her or his disability, i.e. the crisis, and this is, of course, unassailable. In an analysis of more than 500 biographies, I found nine typical forms of aggression. I shall only mention one of these here, but this was one which was described in two thirds of the biographies analyzed. Here aggression takes the form of wishing one's child or oneself dead. The tragic aspect of this third phase of the spiral is the vicious circle of aggression from which escape seems impossible. The affected person complains: "*Why me . . . ?*" and becomes aggressive. The people closest at hand retort by asking: '*Why do you treat us so aggressively? It's not our fault!*' and they meet aggression with aggression. This in turn confirms the affected person in the self-fulfilling prophecy: '*Everything, everyone is against me!*' and this sets the vicious circle spinning again. Only when we learn to see that each feeling of personal injury stems from a misinterpretation of the real situation is it possible for us to break out of this vicious circle.

Parallel to this phase or building upon it, comes the fourth phase of the spiral, that of 'negotiation' with doctors, with fate, with God and the world. It may be along the lines of the question: '*If . . . then . . . ?*' The long march through the 'world of the medical department stores' begins (the biographers report on average twenty-three consultations!). Alternatively, we try the 'search for miraculous cures' (pilgrimages are described by two thirds of the biographers). At the end of this financial and mental shopping spree, all are inevitably in a condition of material and spiritual bankruptcy. We reach the fifth phase of the spiral, that of 'depression'. '*What for . . . it's all pointless . . . ?*' Here again, the over 500 biographies illustrate two distinct and typical patterns of interpretation. On the one hand, there is grieving over what has now gone for good (health, the birth of a non-disabled child), in other words, what we call 'retrospective grief'. On the other hand, there is grieving over what will presumably have to be bidden goodbye to in the future (friends, colleagues, status), in other words, 'anticipatory grief'. Only a brief reference is possible here to the fact that ananalysis of the biographies shows that two thirds of the subjects break off their learning process at this point and for the rest of their lives persist in aggression, negotiation or depression, a condition which is equivalent to social isolation.

The TARGET STAGE of the spiral will be described very briefly. Only a third of the biographers reach this sixth phase: that of 'acceptance'. '*Now I begin to realize . . . ! . . . I can . . .*'. It is no longer a matter of knowing what can be achieved with what remains. For what I have is less important than what I make of what I still have. The seventh phase that of 'activity', is the natural sequel to the sixth phase. It is now a matter of '*I'll handle it . . . !*' This phase is the root of all self-help and of all pioneering groups as well as organizations which may subsequently be formed, for it culminates in the final eight phase of the spiral, that of 'solidarity': '*We handle it together . . . !*' I begin to look away from myself and to assume my responsibilities as part of the social and collective 'we'.

To conclude, I refer once again to the pyramidal character of the spiral, with the majority found in the initial stage and the minority in the target stage, because most of the affected – dependent only on themselves – have had to start on and persevere in this crash course of crisis management without any assistance from others.

We cannot deal here with the form taken by the process of learning in the different forms of disability described in the biographies, or with factors which exert an influence in it, or again with the key role played by aggression in particular. \* If there'll be time, I'll intend to present a case study in crisis management by Pearl S. Buck's autobiography "*Beloved Suffering Child*". \*