

Letter from Argentina: Crisis — The Day After

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In our last communication, we described the intense economic crisis that has affected our country since December 2001. Things have not changed much since then, but we have got used to the idea, meaning that the crisis has stabilised and 'naturalised' and become part of our daily life. Slowly, our society as a whole has mobilised in order to be able to lend full support to people with different needs. (As you might remember from previous letters, each of us — Eduardo and Lia — works in different institutions: Lia is part of an interdisciplinary team in a Family Court and Eduardo is a member of the Argentine Society for Psychotrauma.)

As we were trying to understand this phenomenon, we came across with the concept of *resilience*, as is described by Froma Walsh (*Family Process*, vol 35 No. 3). According to Walsh, 'resilience' consists of fundamental interactive processes which allow families to endure challenges and recover from crises. Her approach is based on the principle that both individual and family growth can be reached through mutual cooperation in the face of adversity.

The way in which a family or a society faces the challenges resulting from crises, both foreseeable and unforeseeable, is crucial for its recovery; and the recovery of all its organisations, communication processes and social resources, and for the reaffirmation of its belief systems.

In such a process, it is vitally important that individuals find meaning in their experience of the crisis so that they can talk about it coherently and can feel confidence in themselves. We mental health professionals have mobilised our institutions to be able to lend every support to the people, helping them to find their own coherent stories.

In order to take into account the influences which act on the people in such crises, both ecological and evolutionary perspectives should be adopted. From the ecological perspective, the following systems should be taken into consideration: dyads (couples), families, schools, workplaces and wider social systems. From the evolutionary perspective, three types of interrelated psychological, social and biological factors should be taken into consideration: inherent vulnerability; the events that elicit or reinforce stress; and resilience factors, which make it possible for systems to put up with distressing circumstances. Because of people's attitudes in our country, it makes it easier to accept psychological assistance if we include resilience in our thinking.

In our country, cases of divorce and the lawsuits for child support have increased. The new causes of divorce recently have much to do with changes in family structure, where it is common, for example, that the father is unemployed or works part-time, and the mother's working hours have

increased. In cases related to child support, most supporting parents have had to reduce their financial contribution, which makes the mothers anxious, and leads to demands for increased payments. Many fathers are not in a position to make such contributions. In such cases, economic crisis uncovers and/or reinforces pre-existent stress.

In our interdisciplinary team meetings, we psychologists find ourselves, along with other Family Court members who are also involved in the current social crisis, with few possibilities for holding onto the objectivity that is so necessary to fulfil our responsibilities. That is why our first assignment is to work with social workers and legal officers, to help them put into context each and every situation, and to distinguish between the existing problems in family relationships due to the system's dysfunction, and those problems resulting from the crisis. For example, we understand that when an unemployed man can no longer support his children, he becomes an anxious and devalued father. Yet, with his family's support, he might be able to regain his job as well as his dignity. Or we understand that a mother, who has been overloaded with extra work, feels guilty because she has to leave her children under someone else's care. Comparing these situations with what each of us is going through makes it possible to have deeper empathy with the personal experiences of others. Above all, it allows us to attribute coherent meaning to the different experiences of individuals.

Every crisis is an opportunity for change. This last crisis has provided the thrust for setting up and developing the study of psychological trauma in Argentina. Consequently, the Argentinian Society for Psychotrauma has been organising an International Congress every year in June since 2001, with an attendance of about 1000 professionals. Such events are an invaluable opportunity to share experience, build support networks and encourage the development of theory. (More information at <http://www.psicotrauma.org.ar>.) Another significant tool has been the issue of the first journal on trauma in Spanish, the *Latin American Journal of Psychotrauma* or *Revista de Psicotrauma para Iberoamerica*, with goals similar to that of the congress (see <http://www.psicotrauma.com.ar>), to which we cordially invite you to contribute.

The task of solving our current problems will probably not be restricted to mental health professionals but, on the contrary, will require the involvement of other experts on a long-term basis. In the meantime, our task will continue to be relieving and preventing as much human suffering as possible.