

Interview with Jim Burtles, author of *Coping with Crisis: A Counselor's Guide to the Restabilization Process*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is excited to be joined by Jim Burtles, author of "Coping with Crisis: A Counselor's Guide to the Restabilization Process."

Jim Burtles worked for several years as Principal Consultant with Safetynet PLC, where he taught business executives how to cope with, and plan for, minor emergencies, disasters and absolute catastrophes ranging from a faulty air-conditioning system to the aftermath of major earthquakes or terrorist attacks. In his current role, as a Director of Total Continuity Management, he is now working with senior executives of international corporations and government departments to help them develop complete emergency response plans and processes which include appropriate counseling and training programs to cope with emergency situations.

Tyler: Welcome, Jim. I'm glad you could join me today. To begin, tell me a little bit about how you became involved in crisis management? Did you always intend to have a career in this field?

Jim: To be honest I was fortunate enough to have stumbled into crisis management. In other words I didn't come to the subject with any pre-conceived notions or prior knowledge. I was a research engineer who had evolved into a computer engineer with a reputation for rescuing and restoring equipment after disastrous events such as lightning strikes, floods and fires. Mostly it was a matter of thinking on one's feet under strange circumstances or making it up as you went along. I suppose I could claim I was self-taught because there was usually no-one else to turn to.

Somehow I managed to get a reputation for performing well under pressure; consequently I was wheeled in whenever there was a major incident and so I began to establish myself as a specialist in what we used to call disaster recovery work. As time went on I became more interested in the bigger picture which meant dealing with the people.

However the irregular and unsociable hours of this type of work led to a broken marriage and some serious personal problems. These were resolved by an ad-hoc mixture of acupuncture and counseling. This caused me to realize how the incidents I was called to were capable of producing traumatized or disturbed people. (Including me perhaps, although I am not sure I would have been prepared to admit this at the time).

I was already beginning to think of moving away from the transient technical-based issues to the rather more durable people-based issues. There were operational, management, procedural and personal perspectives to every major incident and I wanted to make a contribution.

Soon I found myself taking responsibility for what you might call the crisis management aspects of what was happening around me. Once again, I found people looking to me for help and support which I willingly gave. I hadn't followed any particular career path but apparently I had arrived at a destination where I was both welcome and comfortable.

Tyler: That's fascinating, Jim, especially because you used your own "traumatic" experiences to help others. Looking back now, do you wish your journey to where you are today had been different, or do you feel grateful for even the bad because of where it has led you?

Jim: I take full responsibility for what has happened to me over the years and I am happy to be where I am, with what I have. At the end of the day, whatever happened to me was because I willingly exposed myself to the opportunities and the attendant risks. My father always used to say, "If you don't play the game, you can't win. If you don't take chances, you won't win." I believe there is always someone who has bigger problems than mine, so I am relatively lucky. I also believe you can only get out of life what you are willing to put in. In other words, helping others paves the way for someone to help you. At the end of the day, there is no profit for those who don't invest.

Tyler: The subtitle of "Coping with Crisis" is "A Counselor's Guide to the Restabilization Process." Who are you referring to as a counselor? Does the book apply to school counselors, counselors in the workplace, or any type of counselor, or is the book more specific?

Jim: My original intention was to provide guidance for counselors in the workplace. However the Restabilization Process can be applied in almost any situation where the client, or the victim, has been subjected to an unpleasant experience. I believe the counseling techniques, guidelines and the training drills which are designed to support the correct delivery of the method will prove to be of interest and benefit to anyone who contemplates counseling of any sort under any circumstances.

Tyler: I understand the company you worked for, Safety-Net, wanted to focus on computer related issues, but your focus grew to the effects of disasters on personnel and the entire business environment. Why can't you just focus on the actual technology issues?

Jim: At the end of the day technology is only there to support the business and the personnel who work there. If we were simply to focus on fixing the technology we could end up with a fully functional office from a technical point of view, but there would be nobody there to make use of it. It would be more like a museum than a place of business. Continuity of the business operation is what counts and technology is only one of the support tools that enable profitable business to be conducted. Skills or competence, information and resources are necessary to sustain any community, business or otherwise.

Tyler: : I understand you have dealt with direct exposure to dozens of real-life disasters, almost a hundred emergencies, and countless problem situations. Would you tell us about the most memorable of these situations for you?

Jim: Because I've always talked it through I don't have any particularly haunting memories so that makes it difficult to choose one. Nevertheless, I do have rather clear memories of one or two which particularly touched me at the time.

Some years ago one of our customers, a Turkish bank, was subjected to an attack by a suicidal arsonist who drenched himself in petrol and then set fire to himself. This set off the fire alarm and the security system causing the sprinklers to go off and shutting down their power supply. As a result, two of the cashiers were left in total darkness, drenched and shivering inside a locked room.

Tyler: What was involved in coping with this crisis and getting it resolved?

Jim: The emergency services arrived within a few minutes, and they quickly put out the fire and released the imprisoned staff. The arsonist was taken away in an ambulance but was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

Fortunately the bank had a disaster recovery contract so all of its business was transferred to an alternate location within 24 hours where it remained for about four weeks. The premises had to be repaired, cleaned and decontaminated before anyone could return to work there.

The two cashiers who had been trapped together in a locked room required several hours of trauma counseling before they felt ready to return to work in what for them had come to be a dangerous place.

From a business perspective, much of the effort involved in coping with this event was the thoughtful upfront preparation. This meant the workload could be redirected whilst the repairs and refurbishment were being carried out. The two cashiers were replaced temporarily by employees from another branch for a few days and all employees were given a week's special leave before returning to their normal place of work. They were also given the choice of changing their place of work although nobody took up that option.

Tyler: I understand you now deal with business executives in helping them plan for disasters. Have you found that most companies are pro-active in preparing for disasters, or do you think most companies need to give more forethought to the potentials that could disrupt their business?

Jim: Companies that operate in the financial sector tend to be pro-active in this regard; partly because they can see the sense but mostly because their regulators require them to be able to prove they are resilient. In most other branches of commerce only about half of the businesses have bothered to do much about planning for the unexpected. Generally speaking, it is the market leaders who tend to be the most prudent in this respect, but I suppose that is only to be expected.

Tyler: Even in the best planned out situations, what sorts of problems have you seen arise that may be unexpected?

Jim: Of course, it is almost always the unexpected that catches us out. That goes without saying, but there have been some rather strange causes over the years. A mouse sleeping in the power supply produced the short circuit that brought a large computer to a standstill.

There was the mystery of the fire extinguishers that did not work. Apparently these CO² fire extinguishers were empty because they had been used to make cold drinks during a hot summer spell.

In the middle of a training course, a pheasant flew through the window scattering glass everywhere and creating mayhem. Training was suspended on Health and Safety grounds until the room was cleaned up and the window replaced.

Tyler: Jim, you must constantly be surprised by stories of disaster in the news, from wildfires to Hurricane Katrina to the September 11 attacks. What are your feelings about these types of events and how they are handled, and what could the government or other agencies do better?

Jim: In my line of work we expect the unexpected and so these events aren't really a complete surprise. They obviously vary in detail and scale, but the effects are fairly predictable and it is the effects we have to deal with. Without being too specific, I would suggest some governments and their agencies do seem to respond better than others. Behind the scenes there are often restraints imposed upon them such as lack of support, resources, training, information and funding. Sometimes the restraints stifle the response leading to apparent incompetence. At other times they manage to deal with everything that is thrown at them despite a few inadequacies. For every event that hits the news, there are probably a dozen others being prevented or managed without any fuss or long term consequences. As you are probably aware, good news doesn't travel well.

However, the biggest hurdle would seem to be co-operation and information sharing, especially prior to the event. Better liaison might lead to a prompt and more suitable response which would probably reduce both the cost and the extent of the suffering.

Tyler: Of course, the people are the most important to help during a crisis. Your book talks about the indicators of stress. What signs are there that a person is in need of help during or following a crisis?

Jim: Most people will find it difficult to remain focused on the job in hand; their powers of concentration will be reduced. Some of their attention will be drawn inevitably towards thinking about what happened and the effect it had upon them and their surroundings. This makes them more error-prone and, perhaps, less inclined to take on the extra responsibility implicit in bringing the business back up to speed. This is a kind of 'mental exit' that can also lead to an actual physical exit. Often people find, or invent, reasons to leave once they have discovered that their place of work can be dangerous or uncomfortable.

Some individuals may show distinct symptoms of nervousness or find it difficult to relax and sleep at night.

On the other hand there may be one or two who feel stronger as a result of facing up to and coping with a difficult situation. For them it will have been a positive experience, full of excitement and interesting possibilities.

Tyler: Your book discusses the "re-stabilization method" in four steps. Would you please tell us what that re-stabilization method is?

Jim: Beforehand there will have been a trigger event that has become the basis of some discomfort. The first step is a Recap session in which people are asked to describe what happened from their perspectives and to explore their reactions. The process of recalling and talking about the event and their responses to it will bring some relief and prepare them for the next step.

The second step is a Review session where people are asked to look at the appropriateness of their reactions. During this session they will come to appreciate that they have a choice about how they react. This is an important moment; they have a cognition. In other words they begin to understand the effects and how they occurred. This brings further relief because they realize there may be better solutions available.

The third step is a Repair session where they are asked to analyze what happened and how they responded before looking at some of the alternative solutions. Once they have explored and compared the alternatives they will recognize that there are better solutions and the choice is theirs. Again, they will experience a sense of relief because they have now identified the better solutions including, perhaps, the best solution.

The fourth and final step is a Reinforce session where they are asked to practice these better or best solutions on imaginary events in the future. Through practicing in a safe, risk-free environment they are able to develop the confidence to face the future and what it may hold. They will feel they are able to regain control of themselves and their emotions under stressful conditions. This completes the process and provides complete relief from their fears of the unknown. They can go out and face the world once more.

Tyler: Will you tell us a little bit about how these sessions are held? Do you do individual counseling, or group counseling for a business when they undergo this kind of event? If you are called in to deal with the aftermath of a crisis, what are the steps that happen and how is it all organized?

Jim: Tyler, I am sure you will appreciate that each situation has to be approached with an open mind so there is no prescriptive way of responding to a crisis. However, I can describe a typical response for you.

Obviously the first step is to ensure the event is over, or under control, and everybody is safe before we intervene. Health and safety is of primary importance.

Where it is practical, I prefer to start the process with what I like to call an opportunity meeting which is a lightweight form of group counseling. Working with business units or departments of people who are familiar with each other and who share the same accommodation, we explain how it is perfectly natural to experience some reaction to such an event and that we are there to help them to learn to deal with these reactions. Then we ask each of them to describe what happened. During this session we watch for any signs of special needs amongst the participants. If we spot someone who appears to need extra help, we deal with them off-line after the meeting.

At the end of this meeting, we offer everybody the opportunity to speak directly to a counselor in private. We also offer them the opportunity to attend further similar meetings where we will continue with the Restabilization process.

If the event has not revealed or produced any severe symptoms amongst the group we can usually continue to work with them as a group. Apart from speeding up the process, this approach has the advantage of sharing their ideas, thoughts and concerns. This has a powerful bonding effect so we end up with a better team spirit than before the event.

Often, the event has only had a direct effect on one or two individuals. In this case, we offer the victims the opportunity to have an interview with a counselor. During the interview, assuming they turn up, we describe the Restabilization process to them and offer them the chance to try it. If they want to go ahead we can start the first session straight away or arrange an appointment. Usually, they like to get started straight away.

Irrespective of the number of people involved, or the choice of group or individual counseling, we always explain that Restabilization involves four meetings or sessions which will be completed over the next couple of days. I think it is important to dispel the idea that they might be attending counseling sessions for weeks or months on end.

Usually, when I am called in to deal with one of my regular clients the staff will already be aware of the fact that we are able to offer Restabilization and they will have a rough idea of what is entailed. Making people aware of the plans and their implications is all part of the normal business continuity management process. In many instances the first session will have been conducted by the manager of the department in the form of a de-briefing session. When I arrive I simply continue what has been started until we reach the end point of the first or Recap session.

I like to schedule the second session within a few hours of the first one—later that same day in most cases. Each session takes between half an hour and an hour on average and I feel they need to have a couple of hours between sessions before they are ready to return to dealing with their feelings. Usually we are finished within 48 hours, or even less sometimes. It is not a lengthy process, but it is very effective.

Tyler: Jim, are you ever called in to deal with the aftermath of a crisis when you feel it is too late to be effective, or have you counseled people who did not get the help they needed following a crisis so they now have to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder?

Jim: I wouldn't say I have ever been called in when it is too late to be effective; although there have been occasions where someone has suffered unnecessarily due to ignorance or oversight on somebody's part. Although my treatment has not been subjected to a formal clinical trial, I am inclined to believe the process is an effective one that will produce a positive result at any time. The first two steps might take a little longer and require more patience but I am sure we would get there in the end. Remember, each session has a definite and recognizable end point which means we keep digging until we hit pay-dirt and then we stop to enjoy the benefits for a while.

Because counseling is not my primary line of business, I do not get called in to deal with people who have had time to develop PTSD which, as you probably know, does not kick in until several weeks after the traumatic event itself. These people are usually referred to someone who specializes in counseling or psychotherapy.

Tyler: Have you had any experiences dealing with the government or the military or veterans of wars?

Jim: Whilst I have considerable experience of dealing with government in a business continuity context, I have no experience of dealing with them as a counselor. As regards the veterans of warfare I have no experience whatsoever. TIR would seem to be the only type of treatment that might be able to help people who have been subjected to the horrors of military service.

Tyler: Are there different types of strategies or counseling appropriate for different situations such as a hurricane where people lose their homes versus a bank robbery?

Jim: From an individual's purely self-centered point of view, the only difference between these tragedies is the sheer scale of the event. Larger numbers don't necessarily alter personal needs or reactions. Each victim sees the ill-fated event from his or her own perspective and background that causes him to respond accordingly. If his response was ideal there is no problem; if his response was less than ideal, then we need to help him to understand what happened and how he reacted before encouraging him to invent and explore better solutions.

In the context of "Coping with Crisis", I don't think a hurricane is much different than a bank robbery, a car crash or a forest fire; at a personal level, the mental processes and reactions are the same. Or, at least the results are very similar.

Tyler: Jim, what made you decide to write "Coping with Crisis"?

Jim: Documenting my thoughts and experiences was originally part of the development process. Before entering into a counseling session with anyone, I always felt it was necessary to have a game plan; so writing things down became a natural part of the evolution of my counseling technique. I felt I needed to have a robust and effective counseling technique because I came across so many victims of circumstance in my work as a disaster recovery specialist.

Eventually, I reached a point where I had a precise method which I felt was a useful tool that could be taught to others. A book was a natural outcome of this thinking; it was a kind of thesis setting out my thoughts on the subject.

Tyler: I know you are also the author of "Principles and Practices of Business Continuity." Will you tell us a little bit about that book and how "Coping with Crisis" is different from it?

Jim: With a wealth of experience behind me and retirement lurking somewhere in the foreground, I felt it was time for me to pass on some of my knowledge and ideas to those who will succeed me. In particular, I felt it might be useful to the students who attend some of my training courses. It covers a wide spectrum of skills and areas of interest including regulations, standards and codes of practice from around the world.

"Principles and Practice of Business Continuity" sets out the theory behind the practice and covers a wide range of specialized skills that are necessary to ensure resilience in almost any type of organization. In short, it represents a lifetime's work of innovation, discovery and practical experience. It offers the reader a broad understanding of the complete panorama of business continuity management and includes a comprehensive toolkit for a wide range of activities.

"Coping with Crisis" on the other hand focuses on one particular aspect that is covered in depth. It is aimed at the specialist who is prepared to help others through difficult times.

Tyler: Jim, what makes "Coping with Crisis" stand out from other counseling advice that is available to the public?

Jim: First and foremost it is based upon long-term practical experience in a relatively narrow field although the concepts may prove to be useful in other similar fields. I have a pragmatic rather than a clinical or academic background so the writing style is relatively simple and easy to understand.

Restabilization requires a ‘muzzled’ counseling approach where evaluation, emotion and comment are excluded. It requires a great deal of practice before a counselor can follow this approach rigorously. “Coping with Crisis” describes a set of drills for developing the distinctive communication skills which are needed to support the process. The section on guidelines for counselors provides invaluable advice for those who might wish to consider working in this field.

The training drills together with the guidelines are likely to improve the performance of any counselor. They will ensure consistent results through the enhancement of the basic technique that is controlled dialogue with the client.

Tyler: Jim, I imagine helping others cope with a crisis can be very stressful for you. Now that you know so much about counseling, what do you do for yourself to protect yourself from being overwhelmed or stressed?

Jim: Whilst I agree that helping others can be stressful, I have not suffered from this problem so far. There are probably two main reasons for this. Firstly, I am not engaged in counseling on a full time basis, so I have plenty of time to recover between bouts, so to speak. In any case, my wife and I both have regular counseling as a matter of routine to help us sort out any little domestic or personal issues which may crop up from time to time. She talks about it as ‘cleaning out the mental cobwebs.’ On average, I suppose we have about two or three sessions a year.

My second reason for remaining sane is through the impersonal style of counseling I use. In Restabilization, one remains focused on the client rather than on the events they are describing; we do not get into sympathetic or other emotional attachments to the client or their problems. If counselors remain disciplined and uninvolved, they are able to remain effective; avoiding transference of emotions and demonstrating to the client that it is perfectly possible to retain control of one’s self and one’s emotions at all times. In this way one can become a role model rather than a fellow sufferer. After all, they are seeking help not sympathy. A sympathetic approach tends to reinforce or even exaggerate their problems, whereas we should be encouraging them to find solutions.

My backstop is a loyal and understanding wife who is always prepared to talk things through no matter what kind of a day I have had.

It is also worth bearing in mind that I am usually dealing with victims of a single unpleasant experience rather than those who have been thoroughly messed up by a regime of abuse or some longstanding painful situation. The treatment is relatively short and sharp; leading toward a positive result, and it is that final positive result both the client and I take away with us. Because the work is successful, it is satisfying and rewarding rather than disturbing or depressing.

Tyler: What kinds of responses have you received so far to “Coping with Crisis” and to the methods that you’ve used for dealing with traumatic situations?

Jim: To be honest, I have been quite flattered by some of the comments I have received. One young student said they were thinking of changing their career as a result of reading my book. Some professional counselors have told me it made ‘interesting reading’; suggesting it may have influenced their approach to this type of work. One went so far as to say they were adopting my methods as a better way of dealing with clients who were presenting a single specific experience as the cause of their difficulties.

Others have described it as ‘well presented and easy to read’ and ‘full of good sense.’ Generally speaking, the feedback has been quite positive.

Tyler: Before we go, Jim, will you tell our readers where they can purchase a copy of “Coping with Crisis” or get more information about your book?

Jim: The easiest place to find out about “Coping with Crisis” is at the publisher’s website: - <http://www.jimburtles.com/>

Tyler: Thank you for joining me, Jim. I hope your book just enhances the important work you’ve been accomplishing.