

CHOICES

Vancouver Island Counselling
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Prevention First: *Building Stronger Relationships Before Crisis*

In relationships—whether at home, at work, or in friendships—we all face moments of tension. Too often, people wait until conflict explodes before paying attention to communication and connection. But just like physical health, relationships thrive when we focus on *prevention* instead of only responding in *crisis* mode.

Prevention

Building Strong Foundations

Healthy relationships don't just happen—they're nurtured over time. Prevention is about creating habits that strengthen trust, respect, and empathy long before problems arise.

Prevention strategies include:

- **Regular Check-Ins:** Taking time to ask, "How are we really doing?"
 - Example: A couple sets aside 15 minutes every Sunday evening to talk about their week.
- **Clear Boundaries:** Naming your needs and limits before resentment builds.
 - Example: A coworker says, "I'm happy to help, but I'll need until Friday to do it well."

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Think of prevention as maintaining a strong roof before the storm comes.



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- **Active Listening:** Practicing listening without rushing to fix or defend.
 - Example: Instead of jumping in with advice, a friend reflects: "It sounds like you felt dismissed in that meeting."
- **Positive Deposits:** Small acts of kindness that keep the "emotional bank account" full.
 - Example: Leaving a sticky note that says "Good luck on your presentation today!"

Crisis Management

When Conflict Escalates

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, conflict grows heated. Crisis management skills help de-escalate situations and keep conversations safe and respectful.

Crisis management strategies include:

- **Pause & Regulate:** Step back, breathe, and calm your nervous system before responding.
 - Example: "I need 10 minutes to walk and calm down before we continue."
- **Time-Out Agreements:** Agreeing that either person can call for a break if emotions are too high.
 - Example: Two teammates in disagreement agree to revisit the issue after lunch instead of pushing through while upset.
- **Focus on the Issue, Not the Person:** Avoiding blame and sticking to the problem at hand.
 - Example: Saying, "I felt overwhelmed when the deadline was moved up," instead of, "You never think about me."

- **Repair Attempts:** Owning mistakes, apologizing, and making amends quickly.
 - Example: "I realize I snapped at you. I'm sorry, and I'll try to catch myself sooner."

Think of crisis management as grabbing an umbrella in the middle of a downpour—necessary, but harder if you don't already have one.

Noticing Signs of Crisis

Crisis rarely comes out of nowhere—there are often warning signs. Recognizing these signals early allows you to pause, reset, and use prevention skills before things escalate.

Common signs of crisis include:

- **Rising Tension:** Conversations feel sharper, voices get louder, or body language becomes closed off (crossed arms, eye-rolling).
- **Emotional Flooding:** One or both people feel overwhelmed—heart racing, shaky hands, or difficulty thinking clearly.
- **Disengagement:** Withdrawal, shutting down, or "checking out" of the conversation. Example: one partner goes silent mid-discussion and avoids eye contact.
- **Blame Language:** Shifting from "This is hard for me" to "You always..." or "You never..."
- **Toxic Patterns Emerging:** Repeated criticism, contempt, or defensiveness that drown out problem-solving.

Tip: If you notice these signs, it's time to call a time-out or take a pause. Preventing further escalation is often the best form of crisis management.

Key Terms in Prevention & Crisis Management

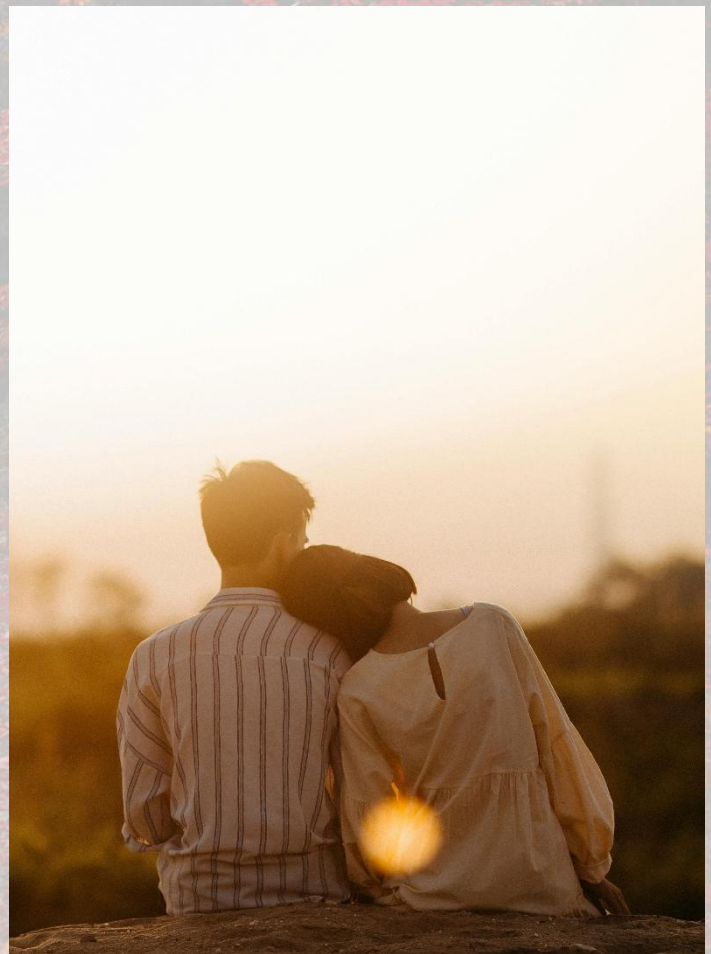
- **Psychological Safety:** The sense that it's safe to speak up, share feelings, or admit mistakes without fear of criticism or punishment.
 - *Prevention fit:* Building psychological safety early helps conflicts stay constructive instead of destructive.



- **Disengagement:** Withdrawing emotionally, mentally, or physically when conflict feels unsafe or unresolved.
 - *Crisis fit:* When prevention is missing, people often disengage instead of addressing issues—leading to more distance and resentment.
- **Toxic:** A relationship pattern marked by consistent harm, manipulation, or lack of respect.
 - *Theme fit:* Without prevention strategies and accountability, unresolved conflicts can spiral into toxic dynamics.

- **Responsibility:** The personal ownership of one's role, actions, or emotions in a relationship.
 - *Prevention fit:* Taking responsibility early prevents blame games and promotes honest dialogue.
- **Accountability:** The mutual process of acknowledging actions and making amends.
 - *Crisis fit:* Accountability is what helps repair relationships after conflict—without it, wounds deepen.

Prevention and crisis management both matter—but investing in prevention reduces the number and intensity of crises. Using concepts like *psychological safety*, *responsibility*, and *accountability* builds trust, while noticing *disengagement* or *toxic patterns* early can keep relationships healthy and resilient.



Quick Practice: "The Weekly Check-In"

Try this 10-minute activity with a partner, friend, or family member:

1. Share one appreciation from the week.

- Example: "I appreciated how you made dinner on Tuesday when I was stuck late at work."

2. Name one stressor and how it's affecting you.

- Example: "I've been stretched thin with deadlines, and I feel distracted at home."

3. Ask for one thing you need in the coming days.

- Example: "It would help if we could plan one evening this week to relax together without screens."

Over time, this builds psychological safety and prevents disengagement.



Healthy relationships aren't about avoiding conflict—they're about learning how to care for each other before, during, and after the storm. Prevention plants the seeds; noticing early signs of crisis gives you time to pause; and crisis management helps weather the tempests. Together, they create resilience.

To learn more about prevention and crisis management, reach out to us at Vancouver Island Counselling to book an appointment.



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