



# HEART WARMERS

## **It's a Crisis. Treat it Like a Crisis**

By Jeni Janek

It's natural to return to the things or thoughts that make us comfortable and are familiar when we are threatened. In a crisis situation, I've always taught that the biggest enemies are misinformation and time. I think from now on and in light of this crisis being a pandemic, I'm going to add another one: uncertainty. Let's examine these for a moment to understand why I say that these are the three biggest enemies and not the virus itself, or people, or weather, or anything else that is a possible contaminant or variable when trying to handle a crisis logistically. I think you'll find that even when bogged down in emotion and overwhelmed with racing thoughts, the bottom line is that a clear strategy to combat these three factors can lead to stability and success in overcoming tragedy in a crisis like this.

When called to schools to help in the wake of a loss, the first thing I know I have to do is untangle mounds of reports, allegations, and sparse details to find the facts to the best of my ability. I can't make a good decision to help with a strategy for recovery if I don't know the truth. Some situations are a little more clear than others, but there tends to always be some set of factors that can be counted upon. It's what we "know" and when we establish that, we can strategically work from there. We don't work from what we don't know and we sure don't work from the speculation that is so fervently present and sometimes enflamed by those who would take joy in the plight and desperation of others. (They are the so-called "Pot Stirrers"- you know who they are).

COVID-19 is no different in that there have been many speculations from the start and most have been legitimately out of concern and fear and rightly so. It's strange, none of us have lived through anything like this (and those who have lived it in an unbelievably different way). But the truth is that the speculation that drives hysteria and panic is not helpful. It's not helpful to me as a Crisis Responder during a crisis of any other nature, and it's definitely not so now. Decisions have to be made on facts, and facts have to come from trusted sources if we are to alter our behaviors in a manner most consistent with healthy and safe practice. Misinformation is NOT our friend. Panic is NOT our friend in a crisis. Find the facts, Find the truth, and let's rationally go from there. This is how we handle misinformation.

The second factor that is our enemy is not people. It's not weather conditions, or buildings, or perpetrators, villains, or substances (though all of those factors can heavily influence how we make our decisions in response to a crisis). It's time. Time is ALWAYS going. It's always moving and it's always working against you when you are trying to figure out the best course for the maximum good for the most amount of people. That's it. That's the formula. And the one contaminating factor in the formula is time. In a school crisis situation, there is what could be referred loosely to as a "reasonable" amount of time to expect for recovery, if strong and positive protective factors are in place (supportive leadership, caring teachers, skilled counselors, strong community, etc.). There is some rhythm of a timeline that could be followed in most cases, and markers that show resilience or sometimes the lack of. Time works against messaging and communication to parents, staff, community members. You're in a race to share the truth and facts so that people know how to respond and plan accordingly. In this case, time is simply lost. There is no "end" or timeline for what we know to do or what has been done before. There are no certain markers for success or recovery like we hope to say "this is done". And even if there were such, the resurgence or rise in numbers could necessitate even more crisis, which would be a devastating blow to those who have already been compromised psychologically to the pandemic. Time is still a fluid variable in this scenario when in all others it can be somewhat dealt with. What we can do is carefully and purposefully live now and cautiously learn from what we have seen yesterday. We can try to make some educated calculations based on the facts and take reasonable steps to contribute to the best possible outcome, knowing that we will never control all people or all factors in this situation. Collective good can only be achieved through individual social responsibility. It's a lesson that might be new to us, but we are certainly learning quickly. This is how we handle time.

This brings us to the third and perhaps most alarming of the triad; uncertainty. We are all somewhat creatures of habit, even if our life cycles are simply relegated to the setting of the sun and the appearance of the stages of the moon. We like stability for the most part and we like knowing who to trust and where to find what we need. This day and age simply do not allow for those factors to be as evident as they might be in other crisis situations. The fear of the unknown has been debilitating; in some instances more so than the virus itself. The atmospheric instability has led so many to become fractured in their faith and crippled from immeasurable doubt. This perhaps to me is a most concerning factor because faith and trust are imperative in resilience, and in these desperate times, they have been fading. So my hypothesis is that the enemy of uncertainty is hope. No one ever goes through a crisis and marvels at their strength or sometimes can marvel at the strength of others. It's hard to stop and say, "I'm so amazed at how you did that", or "how we did that", when the battle is raging. It won't be for some time before we can breathe and settle and be out of the adrenaline rush that comes from responding to the crisis that we can say that. But wait and see; we will say it.

You battle misinformation with good information. You battle time with good planning. You battle uncertainty with hope. If we focus on what we can do and know where we want to go and work together to get there, nothing can stop us. We won't know what we are truly capable of until we've fully come through on the other side.