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Creating a Strong Family: The Chinese Symbol for Crisis

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

Strong families know how to manage difficult times in life creatively. Many counselors believe that one of the most important things a family can do in a time of crisis is to *reframe* the situation, i.e., look at what is happening to the family from a different perspective. For example, if a mother is a member of a National Guard unit that is being deployed outside the United States in a time of national uncertainty, this is clearly a significant challenge for the father, children, grandparents and other loved ones left behind. Countless questions come up: Will Mom be OK? Can everyone left behind adjust to life without her for a while? And so forth.

But in many critical times such as this one, families often have little choice in the situation. Each individual family member can spiral down into depression or anger over the difficulty they will be facing when Mom leaves. Or, the family can hold a series of group discussions and focus on how they can work together to meet the challenges they face. They can find ways to maintain communication with Mom, even though she will be physically absent. In this way they can ensure that she will still be a strong psychological presence in the family. Dad can figure out ways to adjust and hone his skills as a

parent to new levels of competence. The kids can brainstorm ways they can contribute to the family's well-being and fill in the gaps caused by Mom's physical absence. Grandparents, often eager to contribute to the family's welfare, can offer suggestions on how they might help.

If the family can see the situation as not only a serious difficulty but also an opportunity to strengthen their bonds with each other, the challenge can be met. The key is positive communication with each other: Anything mentionable is manageable. In essence, if we can find the courage to talk with each other about a problem, we can find ways to solve it.

Families sometimes fall into disarray during times of crisis, but those families who can recover from the initial shock and sense of despair and band together to find solutions to their difficulties commonly say they feel stronger and more appreciative of each other as family members. "I wouldn't ever want to go through something like that again," people are likely to say, "but I wouldn't take a million dollars for the love we now share with each other as a result of our ability to support and care for each other till the crisis was over."

Human beings have been relying on their creative ability to reframe difficult life situations for a long, long time. The Chinese symbol, or pictograph, for the word crisis is a composite of two other pictographs: the symbol for "danger" and the symbol for "opportunity." For thousands of years, the Chinese have known that a crisis can be a dangerous time but also a time to look for new opportunities. Life can be even better and more fulfilling if we can find ways to endure hardships together.

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