

CHECKLIST

Personal Crisis Pre-Flight Check





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The first 48 hours after personal crisis hits are when most leaders make their costliest mistakes. The leaders who hold their authority through the worst weeks of their lives do not improvise. They run a structured response in the first two days that locks in protection for the following two months.

Use this checklist the moment a personal crisis hits. Work through the five categories in order. Items 1 through 8 should be done in the first 12 hours. The rest fit inside the following 36. The goal is not to solve the crisis. The goal is to install the operational scaffolding that buys you the bandwidth to handle it without losing your professional standing.

1. Stabilise Yourself (Hour 1)

☐ **Pause and name the emotion silently**

Take 30 seconds alone, breathe, and explicitly state to yourself what you are feeling ("I am terrified," "I am grieving"). Naming the emotion moves brain activity from the reactive amygdala to the logical prefrontal cortex and gives you back cognitive control before your next interaction.

☐ **Schedule a grief or fear appointment with yourself**

Put a 60-minute block on your calendar for tonight, labelled however you want, where you will sit with the emotion. The brain is remarkably cooperative when it trusts the emotion will be addressed; deferring it without a scheduled return is what causes it to leak into work.

☐ **Trigger a transition ritual before re-entering work mode**

Do one specific physical action (three-breath pause, walk around the block, coffee re-pour) to signal your nervous system that work mode is starting. The ritual installs a boundary you can re-deploy at every transition this week.

☐ **Name one person outside work to debrief with tonight**

Identify a partner, friend, sibling, or therapist who can hold the personal weight while you handle the professional response. Crisis processing requires a safe relationship that is not your workplace.

2. Communicate Selectively (Hours 1 to 12)

☐ **Identify your inner circle (1 to 3 names maximum)**

List the people at work who require the full operational truth because your reduced capacity directly affects their decisions:

usually your direct manager, a business partner, or a senior team lead. Everyone else gets a different version of the story.

☐ **Send a brief Acknowledge-Assure-Ask message to your inner circle**

Write three short sentences: acknowledge the situation in vague-but-honest terms, assure them of your commitment to the work, ask for the specific temporary adjustment you need (e.g., "offline after 4 PM for the next four weeks"). This converts disclosure from an emotional event into an operational adjustment.

☐ **Build a written do-not-share list before any further conversation**

On a single sheet, list the personal details you will not volunteer (diagnosis, prognosis, custody specifics, financial figures, emotional state). Carry it to every disclosure conversation this week and read it before you walk in.

☐ **Draft (do not send) your middle-circle message for tomorrow**

Pre-write a one-sentence update for peer managers naming operational impact only (e.g., "Managing a family situation; response times slower for the next four weeks"). Sending it 12 to 24 hours after your inner-circle conversation keeps you in control of the rollout.

3. Triage Your Workload (Hours 4 to 24)

☐ **Cancel every non-critical meeting on your next 7 days**

Go through your calendar and decline anything that is not a glass ball, meaning anything that will not break permanently if you skip

it. Routine status meetings, optional working sessions, and recurring catch-ups all qualify for the cut.

☐ **List the 3 most critical glass-ball deliverables for the next two weeks**

Identify the deliverables that will shatter and cause permanent damage if dropped: payroll approval, a regulatory filing, a client retention call. These get your remaining bandwidth.

☐ **Label every other commitment D, P, or C**

For each remaining task or meeting, mark it D (delegate to a named person), P (postpone two weeks), or C (cancel entirely). Avoid leaving anything unlabeled; ambiguity defaults to your plate.

☐ **Identify the one most-important decision in the next 48 hours**

Name the single decision that only you can make and that has the highest downstream impact. Protect the bandwidth to make it well; everything else gets triaged around it.

☐ **Reschedule any deep-work block inside the 48-hour window**

Move strategic thinking, complex writing, and high-stakes analysis to the second or third week. Your executive function is reduced right now; spending it on deep work guarantees a bad output.

4. Build the Handoff (Hours 12 to 36)

☐ **Choose the person who will own one of your glass balls**

Pick a specific direct report or peer who has the skill and the bandwidth to carry one critical deliverable. Pre-existing

relationship matters more than seniority; you are buying speed, not building someone's career.

☐ **Write a Commander's Intent handoff in writing**

In three short paragraphs, state the outcome you need (not the process), the resources and authority you are giving them, and any non-negotiable constraints (budget cap, deadline, regulatory rule). Commander's Intent means delegating the destination, not the route.

☐ **Set up a low-overhead check-in protocol**

Agree on a single weekly format such as a three-bullet email every Friday or a 15-minute Tuesday call. Short enough that maintaining it does not drain you, structured enough that you stay informed.

☐ **Confirm the handoff in writing with a one-paragraph email**

Send a brief email naming the deliverable, the new owner, the check-in cadence, and the date the handoff takes effect. Written confirmation prevents the ambiguity that pulls work back to your desk during a crisis.

5. Set the Recovery Window (Hours 24 to 48)

☐ **Pick a duration for your reduced-capacity window**

Choose a specific timeframe (commonly four weeks, sometimes six) during which your adjusted operating model holds. A defined window makes the change feel temporary and prevents indefinite drift.

☐ **Install one morning transition ritual you will protect**

Choose one consistent physical action (the badge beep, the first sip of coffee, three deliberate breaths) that signals to your nervous system that your personal stress is parked. Consistency

matters more than complexity; do the same action every day for the duration of the window.

☐ **Install one evening transition ritual you will protect**

Do one consistent physical action when leaving work (changing clothes, a 10-minute walk, writing one journal sentence) that signals it is safe to feel the emotion you boxed up during the day. Without an evening ritual, the deferred emotion eventually breaks through unpredictably.

☐ **Schedule a 15-minute Friday capacity check for the next 4 weeks**

Put a recurring calendar block every Friday afternoon labelled "Capacity Check." Use it to review the upcoming week, decide whether you need to renegotiate your capacity window, and catch any plastic balls that have slipped back onto your plate.

☐ **Write your own "what to do next" note for hour 48**

Spend 5 minutes writing yourself a short note: what worked, what to do differently in the next 48, and one operational adjustment to negotiate if your capacity is lower than expected. Future-you will thank present-you for the handoff.