

**Crisis, Emergency, Disaster, and Catastrophe Defined**

Frances L. Edwards, San Jose State University/ Mineta Transportation Institute, San Jose, CA,  
[frances.edwards@sjsu.edu](mailto:frances.edwards@sjsu.edu)

**Synonyms:** calamity, turning point, trauma, tragedy, adversity, cataclysm, devastation

**Definition:** an unwelcome event with negative consequences and various spatial impacts

**Introduction:**

Various terms are used in emergency management to define unwelcome events, their size and impact. All of these events include the sense of unwelcome-ness - negative impacts on individuals, families and communities, and some kind of loss – material, psychological or spiritual. The purpose of this section is to provide an understanding of the nuances of these terms in the field of emergency and crisis management.

**Main Text: (8 double spaced, TNR 11 pt)**

Unwelcome events occur seasonally, cyclically, through technological failure, or through human error or intent. These events may impact only one person, in which case the event is managed by that person or family. Conversely some unwelcome events have widespread, regional or even global impact, and require the coordination of multiple actors to manage the event and its outcomes. Specific terms have been developed to impart the differences in impact and severity of these unwelcome events. The four most commonly used in crisis management are crisis, emergency, disaster and catastrophe. Each implies a different level of impact and a different response requirement.

**Crisis**

A crisis is a sudden unwelcome event. It may have natural causes, technological causes or human causes. A crisis may impact one person, such as when someone has a heart attack. That is a medical crisis for that person, with impacts on his or her immediate family, workplace colleagues and perhaps community. However, the response system is in place to provide rapid medical response and intervention, often leading to a good outcome for the patient and his associates. However, the event is upsetting, carries