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Crisis Centers Turn to Texting to Help Teens

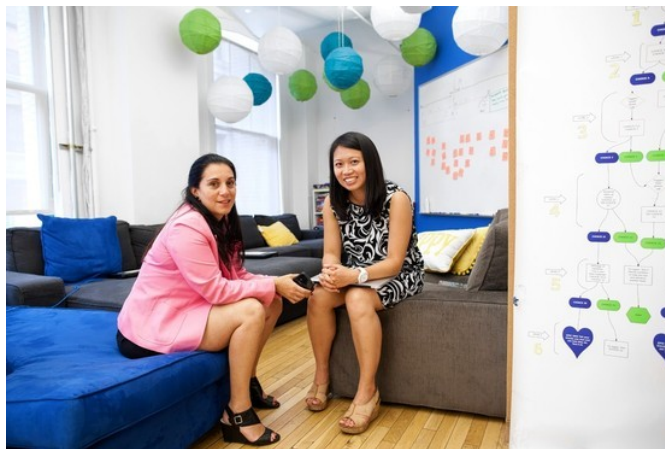
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By Angela Chen

Sometimes a call for help isn't as successful as a text for help—at least that is the thinking from several organizations offering text hotlines that aim to serve people in distress.

A few national help lines are training staff and volunteers in the art of counseling via text message or online chat. The added anonymity of digital communication means people seeking help talk more openly about experiences such as sexual abuse on chat and text than on phone lines, says Katie Ray-Jones, president of the National Dating Abuse Helpline in Austin, Texas, which has been offering texting services for about three years and now gets texts from victims at about the same rate it gets phone calls.



Teens prefer texting when talking about intimate issues, says Danah Boyd, an assistant professor of media, culture and communication at New York University. “It’s not that they’re incapable of talking,” Ms. Boyd says. “When they’re in crisis, more often than not, the need for intimacy, the need for privacy trumps all else.”

The shift to include texting comes with a big scientific benefit: Text data is far easier to sift through than phone data. Some researchers are using help-line text

conversations to determine the most effective ways for counselors to communicate with people seeking help for issues such as depression or abuse.

Bob Filbin, chief data scientist at Crisis Text Line, a nonprofit startup based in New York, has been running a preliminary analysis of text messages the help line has received. Three times as many people responded to questions that emphasized emotions (for example, “do you want to talk to someone who understands your feelings?”) compared with questions that emphasized help (“are you in crisis? What do you need?”).

Crisis Text Line, which launched this month, aims to serve as an umbrella service that connects teens texting for help with clinics nationwide. Its partner clinics so far include Switchboard in Miami, Samaritans in Boston and Seattle's Crisis Clinic. Crisis Text Line also has joined with MIT Media Lab, part of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to analyze text communications. It hopes to gain insights on what makes for effective message wordings, and what are the optimal message length and response time. MIT Media Lab says it plans to publish the analyses with the aim of helping clinic specialists to improve text-based counseling.

Some help-line counselors prefer voice calls to texting. Whitney Laas, who works full time as a supervisor and counselor at the National Dating Abuse Helpline, says she initially preferred counseling via text because she had more time to think through her responses. Now, the 25-year-old says she prefers voice calls. "You can usually work out a situation more quickly on the phone because there's not the lag in chat times," says Ms. Laas.

"The thing I find difficult about texting is establishing that connection with the person because everything is stripped away," says Fran McTernan, a volunteer at Contact We Care, a general crisis line based in Westfield, N.J. "I have no voice, I don't know if I'm talking to a man or a woman, I can't hear the tone."

Still, Ms. McTernan says, she has communicated with people for whom texting is easier because they can't bring themselves to verbalize their feelings.

A digital help line requires counselors be "very succinct because you lose the user on the other end if you're very wordy," says Ms. Ray-Jones, of the National Dating Abuse Helpline. "You learn to really ask very pointed questions through the digital services and keep the responses as short as can be."

For example, a phone conversation might find a counselor using validating statements such as "wow, that must be tough" and talking through manipulative strategies that an abuser may use to control the victim, Ms. Ray-Jones says. On digital services, she says, the counselor will send a Web link to that information and prompt the user from there. "We can get to that information really quickly, whereas in a phone conversation it'll take me more time," she says.

Ms. Ray-Jones says she is working to launch a text service for the National Domestic Violence Hotline, the nonprofit parent group of the National Dating Abuse Helpline. The main obstacle: the volume of queries. The Dating Abuse Helpline usually receives about 1,600 calls a month, whereas the Domestic Violence Hotline receives about 22,000. "We would not want to launch a service if we didn't have the technological capacity to sustain it," she says.

Susan Fasano, director of programs at Contact We Care, says people who text in are more often in immediate danger of self-harm than people who telephone. The call-in line attracts many lonely "regulars" who simply want to talk, she says.

"On the text line, I think people find it easier to talk about being in crisis or wanting to die," Ms. Fasano says. "On the telephone, I think it's harder for people to let it out, so we have to really get underneath what the words are. Sometimes it's not as obvious on the phones as on the text lines."