

DIGITAL COUNSELING: EUROPEAN HELPLINES PROVIDING LISTENING SERVICE VIA CHAT AND EMAIL

Diana Rucli – IFOTES director

Introduction

Helplines for emotional support have been active in Europe for more than 60 years. They were created in the 1950s for suicide prevention, but recently they have become the most accessible means to find a listener who is prepared for any kind of emotional emergency, at the very moment it occurs. Helplines are accessible 24 hours a day and assure not only confidentiality, but also the caller's right to remain anonymous. This allows speaking freely about any kind of problem, without fear of judgments or stigma.

Over the decades, the national federations of European helplines have expanded their service to include digital channels, first by starting an email counseling service, then integrating chats and text messages, either through their own platforms and apps, or on existing ones such as WhatsApp.

Rules of practices fixed 60 years ago remain valid for all counseling activities developed later. Nevertheless, some aspects have been transformed and adapted to the different media and the different the ways of communicating, also with regard to the most intimate and private personal issues.

Users of digital listening services

Over the past 10-15 years, email and chat contacts have significantly increased, but while requests via email have stabilized, chat contacts are steadily increasing. This is partly due to the fact that many users are young people who are more familiar with this technology and method of communication.

Chat has required the most adjustment in the way the listening service is provided. Chat is not just an alternative for those that for some reason are unable to speak over the phone. It is a means specifically chosen by users, who want to chat.

Based on data collected by IFOTES (International Federation of Telephone Emergency Services) chat users are mainly young (50% under 30) and female (about 75%). They are main reasons they contact the helplines are for relationship problems (love, family, friends, colleagues) 25%; mental health problems, addictions, and psychological disorders 19%; loneliness 10%; suicidal thoughts 9%.

Considering that telephone callers are mainly people in the over 40 age group, chat is an important medium for young people to access a listening service in a digital mode most suited to their way of communicating.

For helplines this entailed adapting some of the management methods and some of the ways of selecting and training volunteers without however affecting the ethical principles and guidelines that have always inspired listening and counseling services.

Norms valid for both phone and digital counselling

The rules established from the beginning in the international ethical charter are still the solid reference for all helplines. They ensure availability at all times and for anyone wishing to make contact regardless of their age, sex, religion or nationality. They specify that callers have the right to be listened to and that their beliefs, convictions and personal choices be respected. Listening is offered in a welcoming and open way and the listener's golden rule is to never impose any obligation on the caller. The contents of a call are highly confidential, especially with regard to information pertaining to private lives.

During a telephone conversation, the listener should remain strictly anonymous, and the caller has the right to remain anonymous. Anonymity is preserved in the email and chat by using technological systems, servers and apps that can assign nicknames to email senders and chat users.

The service is entirely free of charge to the caller and no payment is due to access the listening service. Listeners work on a voluntary base, having been selected, and trained. They are also supervised in order to constantly improve their listening skills.

These general rules apply to all the different methods of listening in order to keep the caller central to the relationship with a welcoming and respectful listener, that is to say focusing on the callers' emotions, their values and ability to decide their own path, even in difficult situations.

Specificity of digital counselling

Helplines are always striving to make digital counseling more available, even though the process of recruiting and training volunteers for this type of service is quite challenging and time-consuming.

For this reason, chat is not yet a 24-hour service and is only available in the afternoons and evenings, when the listening services are most in demand. There is usually a time limit for chat to focus on the caller's need and emotional emergency and prevent it from simply becoming a way of passing the time and preventing other people from getting emotional support.

While the email response service does not require real-time presence and can be more easily managed (typically a response is given within 24 hours), the chat service along with counseling service and telephone listening service requires simultaneous presence despite being « faceless » and « spaceless ». Furthermore, it can also create a certain level of disinhibition that needs to be managed in order to preserve the effectiveness of the dialogue.

As a result, extremely specific skills are required in addition to the listening skills needed for telephone counseling. Those who provide chat must have an adequate mindset for this kind of communication. They must be skilled in typing on a computer, good and fast writers, able to “understand” the style of chat and to use the specific chat language: e.g. read between the lines, pay attention to what is written and how is written, give short answers, speak explicitly, etc.

In a nutshell, volunteers working in a chat service need to be familiar with this type of communication and this often means being in the same age range as the people accessing this service.

This has led to the search for and the recruitment of young people to helplines as listeners and chatters. They are provided with adequate training and careful supervision, thus updating the helpline services and guaranteeing their continuity in accordance with the founding ethical principles and rules that still remain valid today.

Promoting listening among young people and recruiting new listeners for the digital service

In recent years, campaigns aimed at recruiting young volunteers for helplines have multiplied. Through the YOUTHES project (2016-2018), IFOTES coordinated research on what motivated young people to consider working in a listening service (see table below) and compared best practices of recruiting young people among the major national helpline associations in Europe. The project was funded by the European program Erasmus + and made it possible to collect interesting information on the training of young people in social skills and their involvement in listening services.

What motivated young adults most to be a helpline volunteer was to get the feeling and expertise of being helpful. 96% of the respondents to the survey of project YOUTHES valued this aspect as a very important or important reason to do TES (Telephone Emergency Services) work *“To feel that I am helping and that the training makes me a good listener and that my volunteer work gives me life experiences and is useful for me in my personal life.”*

Young people do not seek benefits only for themselves. They want to give something and to make a difference in the world.

Training at helplines develop listening skills and prepare them for their professional and social and personal lives. It also makes them better at handling crisis and at facing challenging situation. They become more aware and attentive to others. They can become committed citizens, and this reflects on their entourage and in their working environment. They spread the idea that talking can help and the benefits of being listened to. They help to ease loneliness and improve lives of many people in crisis.

However, it is not always easy for the volunteers to feel they have been helpful. The callers and chat users are anonymous, and the conversations are “here and now” so there is no possibility to know what happened after a call or chat. Therefore, it is important to give this

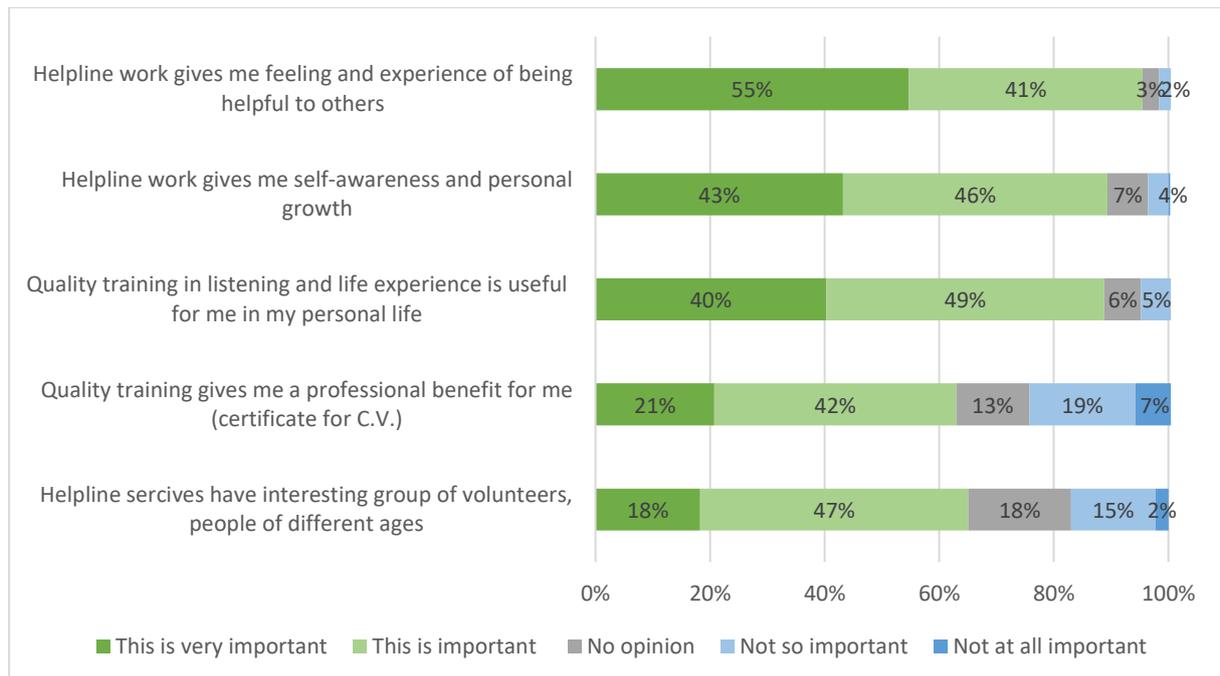
feedback in another way, for example in group discussions or consulting sessions within listeners' community.

The quality of the training provided also makes working in helplines attractive for young people. Training makes it possible for volunteers to test themselves and to improve their communication and listening skills. Training and work in helplines give an important team and group experience. For those doing social studies training, listening work gives a possibility to define or complete a professional project through practice or casework. These skills remain even after young people leave the telephone emergency services.

Trained listeners are a resource both for the emotional support services and the community. TES training and work contribute to develop listening and communication skills, empathy, open-mindedness, respect for others, non-judgmental attitudes, commitment, a culture of caring, values, a sense of solidarity, responsibility, an interest in social networking.

By training young adults in listening skills, helplines contribute to improve society in general.

Table: motivation of young people for working in a helpline (YOUTHES project)



Conclusions

With new and young volunteers, helplines can further enrich their digital service for the benefit of the population of the same age.

When helplines were created, they used the most modern technology available and this must continue. Each era develops its own communication methods and a listening and counseling such as a helpline must continue to adapt and develop their services accordingly.

The aims remain unchanged: to enable anybody in need to receive immediate emotional support, to promote the culture of listening, to improve access to training in communication and social skills, as well as giving people the experience of solidarity and mutual help, especially for the next generation.

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References

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[Empowering Listening Skills](#) – Educational Path for Emotional Well-Being: profile of listener and training program, under the UE Programme Erasmus +, Project Number 2015-1- DE02-KA204- 002492

[TESVolSat](#) - Survey on Volunteer Satisfaction and Motivation; published in 2015, under the EU Lifelong Learning Programme GRUNDTVIG – Project number 2013-1-BE1_GRU06-00495

Video [Je suis bénévole pour Sos Amitié](#)



Diana Rucli

Director of [IFOTES](#) (International Federation of Telephone Emergency Services) and President of [ARTESS](#) (Association for Research and Training on Emotional Support Skills). Trainer in soft skills and self-development. Project-leader in European projects for social development.

Contact Email: d.rucli@ifotes.org