

For teens in crisis, texting provides an outlet for assistance

October 31 2013, by Lauren Zumbach

Picking up the phone can be tough for teens in crisis. A new hotline aims to make it easier by letting them seek help through their preferred mode of communication: texting.

Crisis Text Line, a nonprofit hotline that launched in August, joined a handful of crisis centers around the country that counsel teens via text. The group hopes to be able to direct any teen, anywhere, to needed services without requiring a phone call.

The hotline is based in New York, but Chicago and El Paso, Texas, are two cities organizers have chosen to focus on as they develop the service.

"Ultimately, we're aiming to be as big and well-known as 911," said Nancy Lublin, the hotline's founder.

Lublin, also CEO of DoSomething.org, a nonprofit for teens and young adults interested in social change, saw a need for a text-based hotline after the organization started texting teens about opportunities to help out.

Teens started texting back - not with questions about activism, but calls for help. More texts arrived each month, Lublin said, from teens struggling with bullying, eating disorders and abuse.

Then they got a message Lublin remembers word for word: "He won't stop raping me. He told me not to tell anyone. It's my dad. Are you

there?"

"The fact that they turned to us proved there was an empty space in the market, one we needed to respond to," Lublin said.

The typical teen sends 60 texts a day, or 100 for girls between ages 14 and 17, according to a 2012 report by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project. About 63 percent text on a daily basis, far more than those who talk on a cellphone (39 percent) or socialize face to face (35 percent).

When someone texts Crisis Text Line with a problem, the message is routed to one of more than 50 counselors at crisis centers in Miami, Boston and Seattle. The counselors use an online chatlike program to text with teens, helping them figure out what they need. Sometimes, that simply means talking through a problem. Other times, the counselor might refer a teen to another organization better able to help. Counselors will try to connect teens to other groups with text hotlines if that's what they're most comfortable with, but if they think a teen needs to call or talk to someone face to face, they'll do what they can to make it easier to take that step, Lublin said.

Many crisis counselors recognize that teens want to text. So far, 12 of the more than 160 centers that make up the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline offer texting, and others would like to but lack the resources, said John Draper, project director for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and president of Link2Health Solutions, which administers phone and text hotlines for disaster victims and veterans.

When Crisis Call Center, a Nevada-based suicide and crisis hotline in the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline network, introduced texting three years ago, hundreds more teens contacted the hotline each month, said its director, Debbie Gant-Reed.

"Sometimes, we have trouble keeping up," Gant-Reed said. "There's a huge need for more centers."

The sheer number of texts teens send isn't the only reason some hotlines are trying to be more text friendly. Text conversations are private and discreet, unlike [phone calls](#) that might be overheard. They can also feel more anonymous, making it easier for teens to disclose information they struggle to talk about, Lublin said.

"I feel like a lot of teens would be really uncomfortable calling someone they've never talked to before about something really personal," said Emily Malecha, a sophomore at Libertyville High School. "On a call, you have to know exactly how to explain things, and you have to hear your own voice saying it."

Emily started working with Erika's Lighthouse, a Winnetka, Ill., organization that aims to destigmatize depression and teach teens about mental health, after going through her own struggle with depression.

"I have called a hotline, but I really had to work up to it," she said. "Texting would probably make it easier."

Teens who witness or are victims of crime might also feel more comfortable reporting what they know if they feel more anonymous, said Juandalyn Holland, executive director of Teamwork Englewood, a community organization Crisis Text Line partnered with to help Chicago teens find out about its hotline.

Texts also create data that's easier to analyze than calls, said Crisis Text Line Executive Director Jen Chiou. Crisis Text Line is creating a team of researchers that will study how message wording, length and timing affect how teens respond. They're waiting until they've collected more data to release results but have created a system that looks for keywords

suggesting a risk of imminent harm and moves those texts to the front of the line, Chiou said.

Some counselors, though, question how helpful a text can be.

"You can't gauge their voice and intonation, the look in their eyes, body language, things that are important," said Chris Carroll, vice president of crisis and justice services at Community Counseling Centers of Chicago, which has a traditional phone hotline.

Texting also raises confidentiality issues, said Nabilah Talib, manager of education and advocacy services at YWCA of Metropolitan Chicago, which runs the Chicago Rape Crisis Hotline. Even if texters delete messages from their phones, law enforcement can subpoena a record of the conversation, Talib said.

Phone calls might be better, but that makes little difference if teens can't or won't pick up the phone, texting advocates said.

Scottye Cash, associate professor of social work at Ohio State University, surveyed young adults about the resources they would use to seek help when feeling depressed. While talking to a family member or friend was the most common choice, texting someone came second. Others said they would use online tools like instant messaging or social media. Talking to a doctor and calling a hotline were among the least popular options.

Technology lets teens look for help and information without exposing something they might be uncomfortable revealing, particularly to their parents, Cash said. Sometimes, the technology they're comfortable using can lead to the wrong kind of advice, such as websites encouraging suicide and eating disorders. That makes it particularly important to make sure they can also find real assistance, and texting hotlines could

be one way to do that, she said. "We need to think outside the box and meet them where they're at."

The National Dating Abuse Helpline has offered texting for about three years. While online chat is the most common way [teens](#) reach out, the hotline receives almost twice as many texts as phone calls, said Brian Pinero, helpline director.

Whitney Laas, digital services operations manager for the National Dating Abuse Helpline and National Domestic Violence Hotline, said she prefers helping someone over the phone but is glad they offer options.

"I don't even want to call Domino's to order a pizza. I'd rather use the online form," Laas said. "Imagine if you have to call about something traumatic."

She sees demand for more texting hotlines in the number of texts the National Dating Abuse Helpline receives about issues their volunteers aren't trained to help with, such as bullying or suicide. Volunteers refer them to organizations that can help, Laas said, but many victims are hesitant when they find out the organization they're referred to doesn't offer [texting](#).

"The younger someone is, the less likely they are to use the [phone](#) hotline. These are people who probably wouldn't get help any other way," Laas said.

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