

# Loneliness, severe mental illness behind frequent calls to crisis helplines

October 5 2015, by Jane Gardner

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People who regularly turn to telephone helpline services are more likely to require complex medical care and are often socially isolated, a new study released for Mental Health Week 2015 has revealed.

For the first time, researchers at the University of Melbourne have mapped the health service use of frequent callers to crisis helplines to

find out what might be driving the calls.

Frequent callers use crisis helplines multiple times a week for months on end. Although they only represent a small proportion of helpline callers, they place a heavy burden on Australian crisis helplines.

They often have complex health issues and experience significant life challenges like [social isolation](#), financial difficulties, poor general health and serious disabling mental illness.

Lead author, PhD Candidate Ms Aves Middleton, said repeat calls may be driven by a failure of the current healthcare system to adequately meet the complex needs of this particular group.

Contrary to previous reports, this study found that the calls are not driven by a lack of access to face-to-face healthcare services. In fact, frequent callers were more likely use a wide network of healthcare providers, including visits to psychologists, psychiatrists, and the emergency department in the past three months.

"Our study found that frequent callers were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their access to healthcare services and they often consult multiple GPs," Ms Middleton said. "So the burden on crisis helplines is unlikely to be reduced by simply linking frequent callers to clinical services."

Frequent callers to crisis helplines are generally 18 to 34 years old, suffer from anxiety, major depressive syndrome, personality disorders, experience suicidal thoughts and were more likely to be taking anti-psychotic medication. They are also less likely to have someone to confide in.

"It may be that people who regularly call helplines are looking for an

empathetic listening ear to ease their social isolation. Or, it may be that they are looking for immediate support out of office hours," Ms Middleton added.

"Further research could provide insight into understanding the type of support that frequent users are seeking from crisis helplines and explore the circumstances of their call.

"We recommend the development of an improved model of care that meets the needs of these people, involving GPs, [mental health](#) professionals and crisis helplines collaborating to improve the experience of the patient."

The researchers followed 713 Victorians over a 12-month period via the Diamond cohort, and examined their calls to helplines at three, six, nine and 12 months. Two per cent called crisis helplines once a week or more for at least three months and 6 per cent occasionally called crisis helplines. The remaining 92 per cent had not called a crisis helpline over the year of follow-up.

**More information:** "The Health Service Use of Frequent Users of Telephone Helplines in a Cohort of General Practice Attendees with Depressive Symptoms." *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* [DOI: 10.1007/s10488-015-0680-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-015-0680-7)

Provided by University of Melbourne

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