

## **Expert report: Volunteers' perspectives in crisis intervention**

**by Patricia Karsten**

Many charity mental health organizations rely on volunteers for service provision, especially crisis helplines do so. This report is directed at organizational practitioners responsible for helpline volunteer training and supervision. It presents recent research findings about volunteers' views on conducting successful helpline conversations, as well as findings from rape crisis counselling studies about emotional experiences related to volunteering, and volunteers' personal development during training. These new insights might be integrated in training and supervision of crisis line volunteers by addressing aspects of conversational competence and emotion handling, with promising implications for volunteers' satisfaction with their role.

The conversation with a caller in distress is the central activity of telephone helpline volunteers. To find out more about the characteristics of successful conversations, Gilat & Rosenau (2011) asked volunteers at the national Israeli helpline service ERAN to describe the most helpful conversation they had conducted. Volunteers concluded that a conversation was helpful when they observed positive changes in the caller's state, and when the caller explicitly expressed that he was better and thanked the volunteer. The researchers identified several strategies that were employed by volunteers: Very importantly, volunteers established rapport with callers to create an authentic relationship, for example by sharing personal experiences related to the caller's problem. Volunteers kept the conversation focused on those aspects that appeared most central to them or to the caller. They also permitted conversations to extend way beyond typical length if necessary and adapted the conversation's pace to the caller's needs.

Beyond managing the structure of the conversations, volunteers also directly helped the caller to cope with his situation. In most described conversations, volunteers combined several techniques directed at the caller's emotions, thoughts and beliefs, and behaviour: Emotional support was given by listening emphatically with a non-judgemental attitude, and giving room for the caller's feelings. Thoughts and beliefs were addressed by helping callers to re-think their interpretation of the situation and consider alternative viewpoints. Behavioural strategies were directed at the practical side of the caller's problem, helping the caller to take action and to consider additional sources of support. This research points to the importance of supporting volunteers in developing and mastering a variety of conversational strategies and illustrates that successful crisis intervention places high demands on volunteers' ability to respond to the caller's emotional needs.

In the context of crisis intervention, emotional aspects of the relationship between volunteer and a person in distress are thus especially interesting. They were addressed in a study by Thornton and Novak (2010) which was conducted at a rape crisis counselling centre. At this centre, volunteering comprised not only answering crisis calls related to sexual violence, but also outbound support like accompanying the client to hospital, police station, and appointments before court. Volunteers' overall emotional involvement with their activity was high, and they experienced a broad range of different emotions over all phases of their duty, which they needed to balance. When they were on shift, waiting for a call to occur, volunteers were typically rather nervous. Later on, during telephone conversations and personal interactions, they felt much

Citation: Karsten, Patricia (2011) Expert report: Volunteers' perspectives in crisis intervention, retrieved from <a href="http://www.patrickarsten.com">http://www.patrickarsten.com</a>
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empathy with the client, but also bouts of anger and outrage about violators, insensitive hospital staff and cynical police officers. Rape crisis counselling volunteers typically tempered their emotions to not let them interfere with their supportive role. After returning to their private life, they often felt sad for what they had witnessed, but also hopeful to have supported someone in need, and optimistic about their achievement for a good cause.

During service shifts, rape crisis counsellors typically postponed their own emotions to give room for those of the client, understanding themselves as a shock absorber for the client's distress and providing support by being emphatic and validating the client's emotions. Rape crisis counsellors' involvement with clients' lives is greater than that of telephone helpline volunteers, who maintain an anonymous relationship with callers. Nevertheless, the strong focus on the clients' affective needs and volunteers' tendency to moderate their own emotions seems to be comparable and in line with what was found by Gilat & Rosenau (2011) as successful strategies in crisis conversations. While these strategies appear to be very helpful for the client, some rape crisis counselling volunteers reported feelings of burnout, which may be an indicator that ongoing deferral of emotions bears the risk of drying out volunteers' emotional resources. This raises the question how volunteers can be effectively supported in sustaining their demanding emotional work, and highlights the role of training and supervision.

Studying the experiences of volunteers during their counselling training, Rath (2008) found that becoming a counsellor was associated with complex personal development processes. Her research was also conducted at a rape crisis centre. She found that volunteers' experiences during training could be structured around five main aspects: Their motivation to train, how their training was related to individual life stories, changes in personal relationships, personal change, and feminism. Volunteer training was experienced as a period of self-reflection and self-development, not only directed at the future counselling role, but also associated to changes in professional orientation, for example as a step towards a new career. Volunteers also reported personal and relationship changes, as they became more aware of their own needs. The study illustrated that training to become a rape crisis counsellor involved not only the acquisition of practical knowledge about legal procedures and support structures to assist clients, but also provided a highly valued space for personal development.

These insights appear useful for crisis line volunteer training and supervision. The elements of successful crisis line conversations as outlined by Gilat & Rosenau (2011) provide the basis for a systematic review of volunteer training. Thornton & Novak (2010) pointed to the depth of volunteers' emotional involvement with the fate of their clients, placing high demands on empathy and focus on the caller's emotional needs, implying the risk of neglecting volunteers' own needs. Crisis line training may address this by preparing volunteers to pay attention not only to the caller's needs, but also to their own emotional responses. As Rath (2008) has shown, volunteer training can serve as a period of self-development and thus provides an appropriate context in which to sensitize volunteers to their affective needs. But volunteers' development does not stop at the end of their formal training, rather it enters a new phase where competences are further developed in interaction with callers. Supervision provides the means of ongoing support for volunteers, helping them to think about the affective components of calls and detect possibly deferred emotions which need some reflection, thus contributing to burnout prevention and supporting volunteers' work satisfaction.

## References

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