

# Helpline and you

Many people are aware of Help Line's existence, but few really know much about its function and working philosophy.

Help Line is a twenty-four hour a day, seven days a week telephone service which handles an infinite variety of calls. These range from purely information requests, to 'rap' calls, to crisis calls. All calls are initially handled by trained volunteers manning the phones, and are passed on to Crisis Intervenors (CI's) or the appropriate agency, if the need arises.

The Help Line workers are volunteers from many different age groups, social strata and economic backgrounds. The majority are students, (especially during the school year) but all volunteers,



regardless of previous experience and competency must complete an extensive training programme. One such programme has just finished this week and now these new workers are supplementing the workers already on the Line.

Training sessions are conducted on a fairly regular basis to ensure that there are always enough trained volunteers to carry on the Help Line service.

These training programmes are carried out in a manner which will best ensure the line's function at an optimum level. Volunteers are recruited through extensive publicity and advertising, and an initial selection process requires that all potential volunteers have a personal interview. The next step is the training session itself, where volunteers are divided into smaller, more intimate groups. These groups are headed by one or more group leaders. Group leaders are those Line workers with experience and seniority, who take a special interest in the new volunteers. It is their job to be there to answer questions, handle any problems, and to generally instigate techniques and methods which, under controlled conditions, can serve to simulate actual Line calls. This involves extensive role-playing, and efforts are made to measure a volunteer's ability to be an empathetic and sensitive Line worker. The group leader encourages participation of individual group members, and ensures that communication channels remain clear.

Another major part of the training programme involves several talks with representatives from community agencies in information and interaction sessions. This aspect of the programme serves to make these community and government agencies appear more accessible to the volunteer working the Line. It also presents an

opportunity for questions to be answered on a first hand basis, and for Line workers to become more familiar with the workings of some of these organizations.

Along with sessions with agency representatives, an effort is made to also have people knowledgeable on certain contemporary issues come in and talk to the group. Using this format, such areas as homosexuality, suicide and rape could be covered in such a way as to make the Line workers more aware of the situations, and therefore better able to handle them.

Crisis Intervenors are involved in the training sessions on a more relaxed level than the group leaders, although some CI's double as group leaders. They are there, not only to observe, but to be observed. It's a good way for all factions of the Help Line to meet each other and start working together at the group level. In the Help Line service, CI's are the people the Line workers can contact if they feel there is an emergency where the situation could benefit by their intervention. CI's are senior volunteers who, in most cases, have worked the Line for a lengthy period of time and are trained in areas of first aid and emergency service, and have been involved in extensive role-playing. They are generally more able to handle emergency crisis situations, but can never be used in a situation where violence may occur. The CI's are also good people to contact if a Line worker is unsure of a course of action and needs/wants a second opinion.

Each twenty-four hour day is divided into four shifts, with at least one worker covering each period. A volunteer is expected to do two permanent shifts a month, although shifts and days can be arranged to accommodate the individual timetable. The choice of shift is a matter of individual preference, and a volunteer is never forced to do any particular shift which he/she would prefer not to fill.

The basic thought behind Help Line is that trained lay people can serve a useful purpose in this type of an operation. No one need have college degrees or years of experience. Help Line believes that any relatively intelligent, sensitive person can often effectively help other people resolve their difficulties. Emphasis is placed on the belief that people can help people to help themselves. The only other requirements necessary are a sympathetic but discerning ear and a genuine willingness and desire to help - common sense ties everything together.

Help Line started in 1969 as a pilot project of the Welfare Council. It was initially a twenty-four hour a day, seven day week, telephone service manned by social work students and area practitioners. This pilot project was carried out for an eight month period. Feasibility studies were undertaken at the conclusion of the eight months, and it was determined that the establishment of a permanent crisis intervention centre would be of service to the Metro community.

In 1970 four students from the Maritime School of Social Work decided to reinstate the Help Line service on an interim basis, until the decision regarding its permanency could be implemented. In mid October of that year, the four students supplemented by approximately one hundred and fifty social work students and area practitioners, again set the Line in motion. The operational costs were covered by private donations and a provincial government (Department of Welfare) contribution. In 1972, the Board of Directors for the Help Line hired a full time director and coordinator, and were able to obtain

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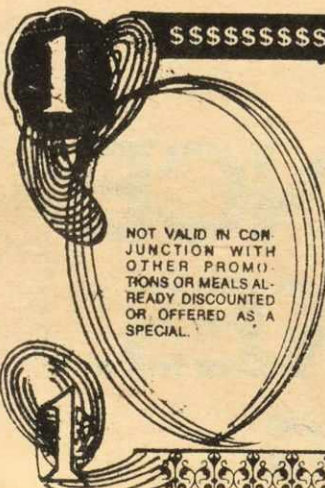
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