

Ten Things Volunteers Need To Know

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Historically, the backbone on crisis intervention services has been volunteers. Human service agencies have relied on volunteers to provide crisis intervention services possibly for several reasons. Economics may be part of the reason since volunteers are just that; volunteers. Since crisis intervention is a 24/7 proposition, the cost of staffing agencies with professional staff would be enormous. Another reason is that many people simply want to help others. Often volunteers have themselves experienced a crisis and want to help others who are in a similar circumstance. The volunteer may have been helped by someone else and now they want to do the same. However, volunteers are not generally left on their own. Professionals in the mental health field provide backup on particularly complex situations. Professionals are generally on call and can be reached via a pager or by phone. Agencies offering crisis intervention services have given invaluable assistance to hundreds of thousands of people over the years.

Volunteers usually receive the training needed to do crisis intervention from the agency for which they work. Although volunteers are trained in basic core listening and responding skills, the mission and policies of the agency generally guides much of the training process. The mission of the agency guides instruction because volunteers need information that is specific to the population the agency services. For example, agencies who help victims of sexual assault must teach volunteers to be sensitive to helping victims following the assault. Similarly, volunteers working at domestic violence centers need to given information about the issue in order for them to be responsive to the needs of this population. Volunteers working hotlines to help people who are suicidal must be knowledgeable about characteristics that increase the potential for suicide. Many of the issues related to policy involve the procedures and paper work volunteers should use when working with a person in crisis. For example, the volunteer working with victims of sexual assault must know the procedures for helping victims should criminal charges be pursued. Volunteers in domestic violence centers must be aware of the procedures to secure any number of services for this population including protection orders, career counseling, housing assistance, and so on. Volunteers working hotlines for suicidal clients must know the procedures for contacting authorities and getting immediate assistance to someone who is suicidal. Although indispensable, training cannot address every possible situation.

This presentation discusses the ten things training may not have covered. If training did address these issues, possibly more emphasis on them may be needed. We do not mean to imply that training is inadequate because everything simply cannot be covered. Rather, these ten things are based on the experience of a volunteer who worked in crisis intervention for X years.

1. The same model does not work for everyone
2. Crisis intervention is a two way street, try to make it more personal. Do not just follow the step-by-step directions you are told in training. Be a real person.
3. Let the person talk. Do not rush into diagnosis.
4. Repeated callers vs. first time callers. Give everyone the same amount of respect. Remember it takes a lot of courage to pick up that phone and call.
5. Do not be afraid of silence. Silence is a wonderful thing that comforts callers. This is when they are thinking and recollecting their thoughts.
6. Do not worry if a caller's story confuses you, or when you are clarifying if you are wrong, caller will tell you. And when they do, do not get upset it doesn't met you are a bad CIS.
7. When someone is grieving a loss of a pet, a person, a job, etc. you should: normalize what they are going through: listen closely to them: support them
8. Crisis affects people in all different ways. Let the client lead the conversation.
9. Men and women are very different. They will react differently to things you say. Do not always believe the stereotype that women are delicate and men are tough. Encourage real emotions. It's okay to cry.
10. Before you start working, familiarize yourself with the office. Look to see where all the resources are so when you are talking to a caller you can say, "I have that right here". This helps the caller know that you are working for them and that they are the only concern to you.