Connecting People in Need with People Who Care

By Binh Au, Crisis Line Coordinator

I get goose bumps every time I walk through the crisis line room. The shrill sound of the phones ringing punctuates the soft murmur of gentle and soothing voices. Each phone call represents a life that is touched, a connection made. Each phone call represents a little of the world's pain erased. Hopelessness turns to hope, and powerlessness turns to empowerment. The counselors joke with each other in between calls, but their demeanor changes into that of warmth and empathy when they are talking with callers.

On a recent night, I sat in to listen to some calls. The counselors dealt with a wide range of callers and life situations. A mother was concerned about her suicidal daughter, and a middle aged man was struggling with his gambling addiction. One 32 year old woman called feeling hopeless and depressed. She had severe PTSD from an automobile accident 3 years prior and struggled to heal and to take care of her 6 year old child.

We don't give advice on the phone. We listen with open hearts to hear the underlying emotions and needs of callers. In reflecting this back to our callers, we help them feel heard and connected. The young woman needed her family to know how much she was hurting. She needed their compassion and understanding. By the end of the call, she was ready to reach out to a local mental health agency to see a therapist. Our counselor encouraged her to call the crisis lines when she needed support.

Suicide is preventable. In my experience, people in suicidal crisis don’t want to die. They want to get out of extreme emotional pain and an intense sense of isolation. Contrary to popular belief, people who feel suicidal are NOT weak and NOT selfish. In fact, Thomas Joiner, in his 2005 book, “Why People Die by Suicide” illustrates how people who die by suicide or make a serious suicide attempt experience a combination of all 3 of the following risk factors: 1) Intense isolation and lack of connection (I am feeling alone) 2) A perceived sense of burdensomeness on others (It would be better for everyone if I was dead). 3) Ability to die (Losing the fear of death). Suicide is not weak and often not impulsive. By intervening on one of these risk factors, we save lives.

Rarely does a crisis occur at a convenient time. Getting access to supportive services in a timely manner is key to successful intervention. Our crisis lines are one of few resources open 24 hours. Crisis lines are crucial in a community because we provide an emotional anchor and bridge to other services.

It’s hard to quantify the number of lives that are saved. In Fiscal Year 2012-2013, we took over 61,000 calls on our Alameda County Crisis Lines. 128 callers had made serious attempts on their lives, or were in imminent danger and we were able to get the them to the hospitals. In follow up calls, the callers are grateful and are able to connect to ongoing care and resources.

This past year, 177 trained volunteers answered the crisis lines. Certified by the American Association of Suicidology and as a member of the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, we adhere to the highest standard of care in helping people who are struggling with suicidal thoughts and feelings. Our counselors meet people where they are at, to provide trauma informed and client-centered care.

Together, we make our communities stronger. With greater capacity to listen and to care for each other we work towards the goal of eliminating the tragic experience of suicide.
Dear Friends,

I am proud to announce that we have successfully finished our 10th Annual Robby Babcock Memorial Golf Tournament. Our two programs are generously supported by the proceeds of the tournament and we couldn’t have done it without our sponsors. I give a special thanks to our Presenting Sponsor, Daleo, Inc.; Platinum Sponsor, Tucker Engineering; and Dinner Sponsor, Marquis Pipeline, Inc.

CSS immediately bridged to vital resources indicated: 24 hour crisis line and secure web based text counseling programs. Both of which are the focus of this Fall’s newsletter. CSS: Teens for Life Program educates more than 12,000 youth each year, providing them with critical information such as suicidal warning signs and how to seek help not only for themselves, but also on behalf of others.

Thanks to the generosity of the Babcock family, and kind support of their neighbors in the local community, 100% of the proceeds from the tournament help sustain these life saving programs. We couldn’t have welcomed Fall on a better note!

So now, as Thanksgiving is right around the corner we ask you to think about those who are struggling and how you can help make a difference in their lives. Extend your hand by participating in our Annual Campaign and make a donation to help us reach our goal of $70,000. Remember that a little goes a long way. Your contribution will help remind some of our 17 year old youth each year, providing them with critical information such as suicidal warning signs and how to seek help not only for themselves, but also on behalf of others.

Sincerely,

Nancy Salamy

From the Executive Director

By Karen Oberdorfer, MA, MFT Registered Intern, Text Line Coordinator & Clinical Program Assistant

What made it such an unusual occurrence for her began happening in new Crisis Support Services of Alameda County. A teen sought for support through CSS Text Line Program. She wrote to a CSS counselor via text message that she had a rough day and wanted to self harm. However, at the end of the text based counseling session she said…after feeling close for months, I went to go out and go for a run, but the road led me to a bridge and I wanted to jump off. I texted your number and had an online text counseling session. Alameda County teens can now text crisis line counselors through CSS Text Line Program anytime between 8:00pm – 11:00pm, 7 days a week. They text their first name and phone number to CSS, and counselors respond to the message above an online secure chat via a HIPAA compliant software program. CSS developed the Text Line Program to entice teens to use CSS as a support during a crisis. Historically only a tiny fraction of calls to the Crisis Line come from teens – yet we know that need is high. In typical high school classrooms, it’s likely that three students have made a suicide attempt in the last year and many more suffer with suicidal ideation. Alameda county middle and high school students learn to teach CSS in voice call at test message shortly after Teen for Life presentations. When they also learn how to help themselves and others by learning to recognize feelings of depression and suicidality. One teen wrote during a test session that “I felt bad, and I called CSS and they helped me so much” and today she is studying to be a high school counselor.

Alameda county middle and high school students learn to teach CSS in voice call at test message shortly after Teen for Life presentations. When they also learn how to help themselves and others by learning to recognize feelings of depression and suicidality. One teen wrote during a test session that “I felt bad, and I called CSS and they helped me so much” and today she is studying to be a high school counselor.

Three quarters of 17 – 19 year olds own phones, 78% have unlimited texting, and almost 90% use text messaging regularly. While these teens openly admit to using long message exchanges to discuss important matters, CSS creatively found a way to utilize the most basic form of communication. Text based counseling gives texters a sense of anonymity and control over the session. One teen texter wrote: “Hi, this is Mark… How are you doing?”. CSS: Teens for Life engaged in 96 text counseling sessions in the first year alone. That number has more than tripled since then. Since CSS launched the Text Line Program teens have sent the CSS counselors almost 4,600 text messages. Over 90% of the texters have had some risk for suicide. Only 126 texters were referred to local mental health services. Text Line counselors engage in short counseling via text messages to help teens and families deal with a variety of life problems. Their kindness and compassion helped people in crisis feel heard and connected. They were in fact “phone angels” in the words of a grateful caller.

CSS engaged in the second fiscal year of offering crisis counseling to Alameda County teens via text messaging program. Not only did texters respond positively to the service, but counselors who experimented text counseling were happy to take more texts. As a result, outreach for the program expanded in Fiscal Year 2012-2013. Teens for Life saw a rapid increase in new test messages in text sessions by Alameda county teens.

During Fiscal Year 2012 – 2013:
- 312 test sessions
- 177 new testers
- Average Session: 64 minutes
- 755 total teen calls & texts

The Text Line Program launched on Nov 1, 2011. Counselors engaged in 96 test counseling sessions in the first year. That number more than tripled since then. With 312 test sessions bringing the word and within only voice calls and texts from the highest ever number reached of CSS: Teens.

CSS: Teens for Life Program is dedicated to helping teens in crisis. Text Line counselors provide compassionate, confidential support for teens and their families. Text Line counselors are committed to engaging with teens and their families in short term counseling sessions to help teens and families deal with a variety of life problems. Their kindness and compassion helped people in crisis feel heard and connected. They were in fact “phone angels” in the words of a grateful caller.

This year CSS responded to 6,815 calls from callers who had some risk for suicide. Overall, text calls resulted in the need for contacting local law enforcement and possible hospitalization. Our crisis counselors de-escalate callers’ intense emotions explore the caller’s suicide thoughts and feelings, and create a safety plan, eliminating the need for expensive, and often times traumatic, hospitalization.

During Fiscal Year 2012 – 2013:
- 128 text sessions
- Average Session: 66 minutes
- 396 total teen calls & texts

Photo Angel
Beth Au, Crisis Line Coordinator

This past year, 177 volunteer crises counselors, and 48 shift supervisors responded to over 6,000 crisis line calls from Alameda County, providing short term intervention and referrals to callers struggling with a variety of life problems. Their kindness and compassion helped people in crisis feel heard and connected. They were in fact “phone angels” in the words of a grateful caller.