

Telephone helpline support for people with couple relationship problems

Executive summary

Introduction and method

- The number of helplines has increased year by year. The latest edition of the directory of the Telephone Helplines Association (THA), a membership organisation for telephone helplines, recorded nearly 1,300.
- Although there are large numbers of helplines, few have been set up specifically to help with relationship support. Most helplines deal with broader issues such as emotional distress or the family; or with specific groups who commonly may have these difficulties, including students or the lesbian and gay population.
- In order to ascertain the level of telephone helpline support available for people with couple relationship problems, letters and emails were sent to the helpline manager of all appropriate national helplines listed in the THA Directory 2002. National helplines were selected if the description suggested that they offered support and if some calls might relate to family or partnership difficulties. A number of local helplines were also contacted including 89 centres and branches of Relate.
- Requests were made for the manager to send appropriate literature and statistics, information on training procedures and recruitment of helpers. They were asked to give an estimate of the proportion of the calls related to partnership difficulties. Non-responders were followed up by email, telephone or letter. Interviews were requested for all helplines considered highly relevant to the study plus those that indicated that high proportions of their calls were related to partnership difficulties. The semi-structured interviews were taped and notes taken.
- Questionnaires were sent to 17 telephone helpline workers who also had experience in personal counselling. The workers were asked about advantages and disadvantages of telephone versus face to face support and whether this altered their way of working. Workers replied from Relate, Careline, Marriage Care and Breaking Free.

Results and discussion

Types of helpline

- The purpose of helplines varied, some saw themselves as offering mainly advice and information, others as offering emotional support and a listening ear. A smaller proportion offered more specialist professional help or counselling.
- The helplines could be divided into three types for the purpose of this study, specific couple relationship support helplines; helplines where high proportions of callers had relationship difficulties (although these were not always the presenting problem) and helplines where smaller proportions of callers focused on these issues.

- Most helplines were immediate access, callers could ring and talk straightaway to a helpline worker. A few helplines offered a service whereby a caller could make an appointment to speak to a worker for a specified length of time (as in Relate Direct) or the caller would receive a call back (as in Young Minds). These helplines normally employed counsellors or health professionals to staff the line. There were a minority of helplines that offered telephone support on a regular basis to clients identified as having high need.
- The costs of these services varied but the immediate access lines were normally free or the cost of the call.

Specific helplines

- There were only a few helplines specifically in the area of couple support. The main ones have been set up by Relate Central, other Relate centres and Marriage Care. These helplines were of two types: the immediate access helplines which included Relate-Line (run by Relate Central), Marriage Care and those run by 5 other Relate centres; and the helplines offering telephone counselling by appointment including Relate Direct (run by Relate Central) and 9 other Relate centres.
- Relate-Line has only a limited number of lines which means that most callers have to ring several times before getting through. Relate has never needed to advertise this service apart from in Relate centres, in the yellow pages, on the web and in agony aunt columns. Callers are given up to 20 minutes and a crisis intervention model is used. In general, there is a considerable overlap between those using Relate-Line and those attending personally. Other similar services include those run by Marriage Care (calls can normally last up to 50 minutes) and other centres of Relate.
- While callers to Relate-Line just pay the normal telephone charge, Relate Direct (which started in June 2002) is accessed by individuals and couples by paying a fee prior to the 50 minute telephone counselling appointment. This fee is a fixed rate similar to that charged for a face to face counselling session. Other centres charge similarly for their telephone appointment sessions.

Helplines where high proportions of clients have relationship difficulties

- “High proportion” helplines included those offering general emotional support, those serving young people, those aimed at parents and families, and those focusing on the lesbian and gay population. Although less information was obtained from helplines covering abuse or domestic violence, it is highly likely that relationship difficulties are very commonly discussed (as in Breaking Free and the Everyman helplines).
- Many of the larger helplines had high proportions of callers with couple relationship difficulties. While these difficulties may not always be the problem first presented to the helpline worker, the existence of such problems and their impact were often subsequently discussed. The small surveys conducted by the

Samaritans suggested that over half of their callers had relationship problems and one quarter had sexual problems or a problem with their sexuality. The sheer volume of callers to the Samaritans (4.8 million contacts in 2001) means that large numbers of callers will have relationship difficulties.

- Parentline is another high volume helpline (approximately 250,000 calls per year) whose callers commonly have relationship difficulties. Many callers had difficulties with their ex-partner or tensions within the second family or stepfamily. Thirty one percent of callers rang to talk about disagreements or conflict, the majority of these were with their current or ex-partner.
- Young Minds is a telephone helpline for any adult with concerns about a child or young person's mental health or emotional well-being. Factors such as domestic violence, parental discord, divorce and separation were very frequent themes of callers and very high proportions of callers (estimated 90%) have been divorced or separated.
- Other "high proportion" helplines contacted included Careline (a general supportive crisis intervention telephone service), Miyad (the Jewish crisis helpline), and those general helplines run by religious groups (for example, Premier Christian Radio Lifeline) and the helpline run by Prisoners' Families and Friends. An estimated 90% of callers to Careline concern relationship issues (in the broadest sense) and half or more callers to Miyad. It was the second highest reason for calling the Premier Christian Radio lifeline and the Muslim Womens helpline has estimated that one in six callers had marital problems and one in 12 suffered from domestic violence.
- Helplines for children or young adults are also "high proportion" helplines. Family relationships were the third most common reason for ringing Childline, while young adults commonly call Get Connected or a student helpline with problems associated with sex, sexuality and relationships. These latter topics make up the majority of those contacting the lesbian and gay sector for emotional support.

"Low proportion" helplines

- The only helplines where relationship problems did not seem to feature strongly were the health and mental health helplines as well as those helplines that offered mainly information and advice rather than emotional support. These low proportions may relate more to the orientation of the worker and the focus of the call rather than the problems actually experienced by the callers. It seems highly likely that callers with physical or mental health difficulties or their "carers" will be experiencing relationship problems. Many might not talk about these difficulties unless discussion is initiated by the helpline worker. In return, helpline workers trained to offer advice and information or focus on health, may not encourage such personal disclosures.
- Taking into account the number of helplines and the volume of calls, the amount of relationship support given by the non specific helplines is considerable. Many

more people are accessing these services than are able to contact the helplines run by specific relationship support organisations.

Who calls helplines with relationship difficulties?

- ***Gender differences.*** In nearly all the helplines, women accessed the services at least twice as frequently as men. It is particularly important that helplines improve their accessibility to men who may have a particular need for confidential support as they often find it more difficult to talk to friends and family. Accessibility to men might be improved by male-only helplines; by offering information as well as emotional support (as in Student Nightline); or by further developing text messaging or email services (which are commonly used by men).
- ***Ethnicity.*** Most of the helplines did not have details of the ethnicity of their callers, but subjective impressions suggest that they are under-represented. The helplines run by religious groups may be valuable in developing access as callers can be ensured that the helpline worker understands their cultural values and customs. Helplines offering languages other than English may also help.
- ***Separated and divorced individuals.*** The figures from Parentline, the Lone Parent helpline and Young Minds all suggest that high proportions of their callers are not currently living with the father of their children and are separated and divorced. Many of the difficulties presented relate to the impact of the divorce or separation on the child (mentioned by 42% of callers to Parentline). It is important that services are available not only for couples in intact relationships but also for those who are coping with the process of separation, divorce and the aftermath. Although many of Relate's clients are separated and divorced, parenting helplines will lead to many more of these individuals making contact.
- ***Sexuality and young people.*** Most young people call general telephone helplines to talk about their relationships or their sexuality. A high proportion of male callers to Get Connected (mostly young adults) ring about their sexuality while young women talk about sex, relationships and pregnancy. Some of these individuals may feel that they have no-one they can ask for help, advice or information. A phone call, email or text message may be the only way they can disclose this intimate information.
- ***Health promotion.*** Helplines may have important benefits in terms of reductions in sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancy. For example, the London Gay and Lesbian Switchboard raises the issue of safe sex with high proportions of callers.

Do telephone helplines access a different population than face to face services?

- The findings from the immediate access lines run by Relate suggest that there may be a considerable overlap between those accessing the helpline and those making appointments at Relate centres (where helplines are advertised). In addition, callers are often advised to go to Relate for further counselling. However, not all Relate-Line clients are able to attend personally including disabled clients or those living in remote areas.

- Widespread advertising of Relate-Line would probably dramatically alter the caller population and encourage more to access the service. However, this does not seem to be a viable option, given the high numbers of callers who currently do not get through because of engaged phone lines.
- Community surveys suggest that most people know about Relate and the telephone service. It is probably not lack of knowledge that deters people from contacting Relate but other issues such as difficulties in admitting to problems (even to oneself), concerns over counselling, or the belief that relationship difficulties cannot be easily helped. One of the findings in our current study on help-seeking in couples is that many feel that outside help cannot make a difference to the quality of their relationship. Others may perceive that their main problem is something else such as parenting, or physical or mental health. Non-specific helplines will therefore always have high proportions of callers with relationship difficulties who would be unlikely to telephone or contact face to face relationship services. How well these are identified and managed will depend on the willingness of the caller and the understanding, ability and training of the helpline worker.
- One reason for setting up helplines is to access sectors of the population currently not seeking help. The data on callers collected from Parentline suggests that some callers had not contacted other agencies before. Telephoning is probably the easiest first step for many people. Individuals can ring with a simple request and then expand if met with an empathetic response.
- The results suggest that some callers are in contact with other agencies. Some callers to Parentline had previously sought help from GPs, social workers and health visitors, but had not always been satisfied with this. The helpline worker had listened to and supported the callers, and discussed further options. This often enabled callers to re-contact these agencies for further help.

Comparable with counselling?

- The managers and questionnaire respondents were asked whether the telephone helpline service was comparable to face to face counselling. Their answers depended on the service delivered by their organisation and whether the helpline service was by immediate access or by appointment.
- Most of the individuals interviewed in organisations specialising in face to face work saw the telephone line as a valuable way of offering immediate support but not comparable to a more structured face to face intervention. Respondents saw the value of clients having access to both types of service. The telephone helpline can be used to prepare clients for counselling or support them between sessions.
- In those organisations where there was either no or a limited face to face service, the telephone conversation was seen as the main method of offering help and not merely an adjunct to face to face services. However, most of these respondents did not perceive telephone help to be comparable with counselling. Clients attending

face to face were seen as more committed and the worker better able to develop a trusting personal relationship.

- Telephone sessions by appointment were perceived to be comparable to face to face work and possible to undertake to the same depth. Appointments, call backs, or providing regular telephone support, may encourage the caller and worker to use the time productively and carefully. However, the experience of some Relate centres suggests that clients may not want telephone counselling by appointment (if fees are at a similar rate to face to face work). Centres setting up services had found take up was low. Arranging an appointment needs client commitment and those with this degree of investment may prefer face to face work.

Advantages of telephone helplines versus other types of relationship services

- Accessibility is a major advantage of telephone helplines including those in remote areas or for those with limited time, caring responsibilities or lack of mobility. Telephone helplines are also valuable for those with very specific difficulties. For example, Relate Derby runs a telephone helpline specifically for the partners of those with Aspergers syndrome. This means that partners can ring from any area and receive help from counsellors with special training and knowledge about the condition. The telephone helpline set up by Prisoners' Families and Friends also means that individuals nationwide can access the service.
- Accessibility can also be improved due to the lower costs. There are no client costs of travel or having to take time off work. The telephone call may be of low cost or free.
- Telephone helplines can also improve accessibility by offering more than one language. This needs to be developed to encourage more minority groups to use the service.
- Immediate availability is another advantage. Many larger helplines offer a 24 hour service and other helplines are open during the evenings and weekends. This improves accessibility for those with time commitments, but it also means that callers can ring in a crisis or when needing most help or support.
- Anonymity is also important, particularly with children or adults in vulnerable circumstances when there is domestic violence and abuse. Anonymity may improve accessibility for people from a range of ethnic groups or those with parenting or sexual difficulties, as talking over the phone may be easier than face to face.
- The telephone may be seen as less intrusive. Both Parentline Plus and Prisoners' Families and Friends offer regular telephone support to certain families in need and this is often considered much more acceptable to families than personal visits.

- Caller control is another major advantage to callers: the caller can begin and end when it suits them, including hanging up and phoning again. They can disclose issues at an appropriate time and pace.

Disadvantages of telephone helplines

- Many participants considered that while individual work could be undertaken in either medium, couple counselling was more appropriately conducted in person.
- The lack of non-verbal cues were considered a major disadvantage. This may be particularly important for workers initially trained in face to face counselling.
- There was some suggestion that callers with immediate access may not always use the time effectively or show commitment. However, this was not seen to be the case with clients who had made an appointment or were receiving a call back.
- Another disadvantage was the cost of the call or calls appearing on itemised bills. Usually the latter can be avoided.
- Staffing a telephone helpline can be very stressful with often no time lag between calls. Some helplines have guidelines on maximum length of call (Relate-Line has a time limit of 20 minutes) which can be difficult for both caller and helper.
- Lack of continuity was mentioned by clients and workers as callers speak to whoever is on duty. This is only problematic for the immediate access lines as continuity is possible for those services offering appointments, call backs, or regular phone calls.

Callers' views

- Callers indicated very similar advantages and disadvantages to those suggested by staff. The advantages mentioned by callers in the Relate-Line survey included accessibility (mentioned by 37%); immediacy of help (31%); good advice (18%); and having someone to listen (15%). Others mentioned anonymity, providing an introduction to counselling, and the impartial service.
- Disadvantages in the Relate-Line survey included: the 20 minute time limit (37%); getting through (28%); the limited advice given (14%); and not being able to speak to the same counsellor (4%).

Staffing and training

Professionals versus volunteers

- Marriage Care uses volunteers while Relate employs professional trained counsellors (apart from Northern Ireland). Other helplines rely entirely on volunteers, professionals or a mixture. Interestingly, some of the lines that deal with difficult problems (for example, Everyman and Breaking Free) use trained volunteers rather than professionals. Are the use of trained counsellors necessary for relationship support? Only a few studies have compared the effectiveness of

professionals versus volunteers and none have investigated telephone work. Comparative research is needed to establish differences in outcome.

- Volunteers are not necessarily a cheap option. There are costs of recruitment, training, support and supervision. Turnover is inevitable.

Training

- Providing support and listening over the telephone is a very skilled and demanding process. Good quality training is essential whether the line is primarily for advice and information or for support. Callers need a caring response even when the majority of callers will be signposted on or given information.
- All the helplines contacted took their initial training seriously. All trained their helpline workers in basic listening skills and most gave specific training on telephone work.
- Most of the helplines contacted offered appropriate ongoing support and supervision. However, they varied according to how much was available and whether this was left up to the individual worker to access.
- The amount of ongoing training varied. Research shows that the skills of workers may decrease after initial training, thus ongoing training is important. Training tended to be focused on the workers' perceived needs as well as the availability of trainers. Some helplines could not afford the costs of many of the outside trainers or speakers.

Training in relationship skills

- Few helplines gave their workers additional training in relationships or how they might be able to intervene to reduce couple conflict or distress. Initial training usually focused on the need for workers to learn general counselling and listening skills which could be applied to any problem. This was seen as more important than providing training on specific problems such as relationship difficulties.
- However, high proportions of the helpline managers indicated that they would welcome additional training. Identifying relationship difficulties, understanding couple dynamics, and talking about conflict may all be issues that could be discussed.
- Training may also be valuable to enable workers to talk to couples as well as individuals. Some workers mentioned that it was possible to learn how to manage a three-way call. They could still focus on the relationship in telephone work and reflect back on interactions and patterns.

Funding issues and costs

- Receiving adequate funding was a major issue. Many helplines had received initial funding but not continued support. Lack of funds meant that many

helplines, such as Relate-Line, could only offer limited hours of opening with only a few lines available.

- There are fewer overheads when providing a telephone service compared with face to face services. There are less costs to the client apart from when a fee is charged. On the whole, centres charging fees for telephone counselling by appointment have found relatively low uptake. These fees reduce accessibility to large proportions of the population. While reports suggest that Relate Direct users are satisfied with the service, the fees mean that many cannot afford it.

Helpfulness of telephone helplines

- There is little objective evidence of the helpfulness of telephone helplines for people with relationship difficulties, apart from client satisfaction. Most surveys find that clients perceive being helped by being given reassurance and support but it is difficult to estimate the extent of the help.
- The Relate-Line survey found that the service was considered helpful or very helpful by 86% of callers. Clients rated kindness, advice, support, being listened to and being able to talk. Relate Direct clients also showed positive responses and the call data reports from Parentline and Young Minds found that high proportions felt helped. They had been listened to and reassured, they had been able to offload as well as being given ideas and information.

Focus in the future?

- Should more resources be spent on increasing specific telephone helplines for relationship problems or should resources be spent on training the workers in existing helplines to further develop their skills?
- Providing relationship support to large volumes of callers is much more likely to occur by providing training to staff and volunteers in existing helplines, particularly the frequently accessed services such as the Samaritans, Childline or Parentline. Callers are much more likely to call a general helpline first and may present other problems such as mental health issues or a parenting problem. Providing training to helpline workers would improve their skills in both identifying relationship issues and providing support. Additional training could be built into existing programmes. Many managers interviewed could see the value of such training and many would have already accessed it if the costs had been less.
- Training in relationship problems might also be valuable for those helplines in the health and mental health sector, where relationship problems were less commonly discussed. It seems likely that many of their callers will have relationship difficulties, often as a result of illness. Helpline workers may be more able to help callers if they receive training in identifying, giving support and signposting on.
- Apart from such training, there will still be a need for specialist telephone support such as that provided by Relate or Marriage Care. Currently, many of these specific helplines are unable to cope with the volume of callers thus leading to

many people not being able to access the service when in need. The findings suggest that diversity is important. General helplines, specific helplines, letter support, email and text messaging all have their place in improving accessibility, especially for hard to reach groups. Telephone counselling by appointment, call-backs and regular supportive calls may offer help to those needing additional more structured support.

Evaluation

- This study found a major lack of any evaluation. While some of the larger helplines had undertaken evaluations, they tended to enquire about perceived satisfaction with the service and its usefulness rather than undertake any more objective assessments.
- Very little formal evaluation has taken place within these helplines. This could be due to lack of expertise but also lack of time to collate or analyse any material collected. The anonymity of the service also makes evaluation difficult.
- There are a number of important questions that are left unanswered. Do professional counsellors help clients more than well trained volunteers? Do telephone helplines have additional value in terms of prevention with clients contacting telephone helplines at an early stage of their problems than with face to face services? Do telephone helplines substantially increase accessibility to the population in most need? With additional training, can individual or couple counselling and support be as effective as that conducted face to face? These are areas where further evaluation would be helpful.

Recommendations and conclusions

- **The need for training:**

High proportions of individuals with relationship problems are contacting helplines. Whether these problems are discussed will depend on the caller but also on the interests, confidence and skills of the worker. The findings of the study suggest that training helpline workers on how to identify and manage these difficulties would be an effective way of offering relationship support to very large numbers of people.

Telephone helpline managers were very positive about receiving such an input and considered that it would most appropriately be delivered during ongoing training. Content could include training in identifying relationship difficulties or picking up relevant verbal cues; giving support and reassurance; and problem solving techniques.

- **Increasing accessibility:**

Telephone helplines increase overall accessibility but men, boys and members of ethnic minorities are still under-represented. Increased uptake by these groups may be encouraged by male only helplines or by services set up specifically for certain ethnic groups. Services in other languages may also be of value.

It is also important to ensure that there are acceptable services specifically for young people as high proportions of this group ring to talk about relationships, sex, sexuality and pregnancy. These helplines not only provide support to distressed young people but also may have value in the prevention of sexual transmitted infections or unwanted pregnancy.

- **Support for intact relationships and those already broken down:**

The findings strongly suggest that couples who are separated or divorced may need as much help as intact couples and families with difficulties. The former may be more likely to contact parenting or general helplines as they may perceive relationship specific services as more appropriate for couples still together.

- **Maintaining diversity:**

The results of this study strongly suggest that diversity is essential. There is a need for general helplines such as Careline as well as specific helplines such as Relate-Line. It is important that a range of telephone helpline services are available, including immediate access lines, call back services, telephone counselling services by appointment and regular telephone support. These supplement face to face services by considerably broadening access and the percentage of population helped.

- **Staffing:**

Can relationship support and counselling be delivered by trained volunteers? How much training is necessary and of what type? Research is necessary to find out what level of experience and training is necessary to bring about improved outcomes and to investigate benefits and costs.

- **Further evaluation**

There is very little evaluation already undertaken. This lack means that it is difficult to ascertain the amount of actual help being given by helpline workers. Client reports suggest that they are very satisfied with the help received but it is very difficult to compare the help received by a telephone call compared with other forms of help. It is also difficult to gauge whether the help is only short term or can bring about more long term change. Further evaluation would provide much needed information on the value of this work.