

WHAT ARE CRISIS SUPPORT SERVICES?

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DESCRIPTION

The UN and World Health Organization, along with other global and regional organizations recognise that mental health and psychosocial support is essential for a person to enjoy good mental health and be able to fully function and participate in life.¹

Crisis support services generally constitute an integral component of mental health and psychosocial support, but specifically they are a discrete form of psychosocial support. They are universal, immediate support services for people experiencing elevated distress and emotions surrounding experiences or difficulties in their lives that they are struggling to cope with. They are a complementary service stream to the provision of mental health treatments.

Crisis support services have three intersecting components: two service functions: crisis intervention and psychosocial support, and a third component which defines the values and the unique characteristic of crisis support: befriending:



■ CRISIS INTERVENTION

Crisis intervention is the provision of an immediate response to a person in a state of crisis with the intention of interrupting that state and de-escalating the high levels of distress and dysfunction that the person is experiencing.² Crisis intervention is concerned with the prevention of harm in the knowledge that the crisis state can invoke maladaptive and destructive responses as a person seeks to escape from intense distress, including violence, unsafe behaviour, substance and alcohol use, self-harm, and suicide.³ Crisis intervention is an immediate, short, response to a person's situation and crisis state.^{4/5} It enables the identification of people at imminent risk of death or injury and addresses their immediate safety. Crisis intervention also mitigates the risk of more severe or lasting mental health conditions developing such as anxiety and depression through enabling the restoration of a person's usual coping capabilities, thereby creating a pathway through which referrals to more specialist services and resources can be advanced.^{6/7}

■ PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Psychosocial support services provide a mix of emotional support, psychological 'first aid', social (re)connection, and the building of self-agency to reduce the functional impairment a person may experience in association with poor mental health, a life circumstance or difficulty, a traumatic or disruptive event such as a natural disaster. Psychosocial support is interactive and relational; it involves engagement with a person through the offer of empathy and respect. It supports emotional health.⁸ Psychosocial support relates to coping theory by building a person's ability to self-manage periods of high emotion and stress.⁹ Psychosocial support recognises the benefit of social activity and prompts meaningful interactions with others and a sense of belonging with the people around you.^{10/11} Psychosocial support counters the experiences isolation and aloneness that can fuel suicidal thoughts; it aids recovery by developing a person's resilience to stress and life difficulties.¹²

■ BEFRIENDING

At the heart of the crisis support service is the relational feature that distinguishes it: the befriending interaction. Befriending has been described as a 'special kind of friendship'.¹³ This is beneficial and can generate hope in times of despair – the knowledge that someone cares. Befriending is a skilful, non-professional support, and it has definable benefits because of this.¹⁴ The befriending interaction involves sharing emotions, pain, meanings, with another in an environment based on compassion and empathy, an environment that is psychologically safe, comforting and non-judgemental. The befriender is a person who is authentically concerned about the person in distress and crisis.¹⁵ Listening with a deep sense of appreciation is a critical expression of befriending, allowing a person to express in their own terms their emotions and their needs. It is an empowering process, based on the belief that a person has strengths within.

BENEFITS OF CRISIS SUPPORT SERVICES

Periods in which a person has great difficulty coping are known as a crisis.¹⁶ They are time-limited periods during which high levels of distress are experienced. This distress can be reduced through the provision of support, but there is a risk that the person in crisis may instead use self-initiated measures to resolve their distress; these measures can be highly destructive such as violence, alcohol/substance use, self-harm, and suicide. The intensity of distress and the time-limited aspect of a crisis reinforces the importance of immediate service responses for those in crisis. While alleviating distress, the provision of crisis support is also addressing a person's inability to cope and creating a safety-net to guard against their person's vulnerability to enact self-destructive reactions to the crisis state.

The crisis support service provides a timely opportunity to check on safety and welfare, something which may not happen without the engagement with that individual. People may turn to a crisis support service when they do not approach any other person or service for help, drawing on the convenience of these services and their offer of confidentiality.

Many crisis support services have high proportions of their contacts experiencing violence and requiring immediate support. The experience of family and gender-based violence often generates a need for crisis support. The impacts of interpersonal violence include emotional and psychological distress and disrupted coping capabilities, and heightened vulnerability of suicide.¹⁷ These are aspects of the experiences of victims of violence that can be addressed immediately through the provision of crisis support.

There can also be a preventative benefit from contacting a crisis support service. This can be done through the empowerment of that person to become more aware of what triggers their emotions and distress levels, and what supports and resources they can draw on at that time to de-escalate and reduce the impact in their lives. Emotional development is a way of understanding, acknowledging and expressing emotions. European crisis support services (Telephone Emergency Services) refer to: "*equipping people to manage emotions through self-awareness, self-esteem and coping skills – termed emotional health.*"¹⁸ Accordingly, the service experience can motivate and equip a person to develop their capabilities to better cope with difficulties in their lives and prevent a crisis from arising.

Crisis support services are open and general services that offer a response to distress and emotional intensity that may arise for all sorts of reasons: a person experiencing profound loneliness, an intense increase in symptoms associated with a mental health condition, or a reaction to a situation or recent experience. The breadth of issues that people contact crisis support services reflects this: relationship difficulties and breakdowns, household finances, indebtedness and income security, housing and safety concerns, social exclusion, discrimination, and harassment, living with chronic illness and disabilities, alcohol and substance use, addictions, social isolation, loss, grief, and despair.

As immediate, non-clinical or non-medical responses, crisis support services can attract and engage with people when they seek help. They can reach people earlier and at the time the person is ready to engage with a service. They can intervene in an immediate crisis to prevent harm, and they can perform a broader function, that of crisis prevention.

POLICY RELEVANCE OF CRISIS SUPPORT SERVICES

■ PRIMARY HEALTH CARE

Crisis support services are first point of contact services. They are offered to all and operate as welcoming, non-judgemental and openly accessible sources of help without asking a person to meet eligibility criteria, an assessment or payment. These services can be offered immediately, as they do not require medical review or psychiatric assessment ahead of the delivery of service. Some people are more likely to access a non-medical service in the first instance to disclose their emotions and life circumstances.

The benefit of crisis support services lies in their ability to provide a rapid and effective response to the experiences of crisis, which are a predictable occurrence in any population. People will be in crisis as stressful, traumatic, and sometimes dramatically impactful events and experiences occur in their lives. A service response that is readily available to anyone in crisis should be included into any nation's array of health and community supports.

The World Health Organization describes primary health care as “a whole of society approach to effectively organize and strengthen health systems to bring services for health and wellbeing closer to communities.” Primary health care services are the first point of contact for many on the full range of health and wellbeing concerns. Accordingly, primary health care must be responsive to the broader social determinants of health as well as medical or clinical matters. At a population level, primary health performs a health promotion and preventative function. These features of primary health care are the basis for widespread acknowledgement of the importance of investment in this component of a national health system for efficiency and effectiveness on population-wide outcomes. Such an acknowledgement features in the current World Health Organization Work Program 14 which relates to a commitment “to radically reorient health systems to a primary health care approach” and the reform agendas surrounding Sustainable Development Goal 3: Healthy Lives and Wellbeing for All at All Ages which call for the “integration of core packages of mental health services into routine primary health care.”¹⁹

Crisis support services fit within the design of a comprehensive primary health service system, as writer Bruce Turley noted: *“The capacity to anticipate, prepare for and respond resourcefully to personal crises addresses psychosocial elements of health and wellbeing that are foundational to primary mental health care and suicide prevention.”*²⁰

The salient primary health contribution of crisis support services is that they attract people experiencing elevated levels of psychological distress.²¹ Literature reviews have established the effectiveness of crisis support in rapid reduction of these high levels of distress.²² Across any population, a proportion of individuals will experience higher levels of psychological distress, but the factors surrounding this can vary considerably, and are often related to social determinant and circumstantial factors, such as interpersonal violence, sudden disruptions in life, loss and grief, incidents involving crime or police, indebtedness. It can be difficult to identify those who are dealing with psychological distress before the impacts of this distress emerge through the onset of mental illness or suicidal behaviour, or another behavioural manifestation of the distress. Recognition and response to distress is an essential function of primary health care.

■ UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE

The UN Declaration on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) 2019 establishes health and wellbeing as a precondition for sustainable development for all countries, reflecting the association between UHC and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This declaration reinforces the related 1996 UN declaration on the right for every person to enjoy the highest standard of physical and mental health. This is often described in the terms ‘Leaving No One Behind.’

The UN Resolution on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support calls for nations to address mental health as an essential component of universal health coverage, calling for them to *“invest in local and community-based action, embedded in local and national services, on a longer-term basis to prepare for and respond to mental health and psychosocial needs, including comprehensive and integrated mental health and psychosocial support services.”*

Crisis support services enable the achievement of Universal Health Coverage because they are available to all, without qualification, entry assessment or referral. Where crisis support services are provided through digital means – telephone, online and chat/text – it takes advantage of the low cost, accessible and private nature of these technologies in most countries to reinforce universal access. Where it is available face to face, crisis support is typically available free or at minimal cost and on a walk-in basis.

It has been long established that there is a place for paraprofessionals in the design of a comprehensive and effective mental health and psychosocial service system. They perform non-clinical functions and support roles that are essential complements to treatments.²³ Crisis support services use paraprofessionals who are selected and trained for their attributes, skills and competencies to engage with, support and befriend those in crisis. Workers for crisis support can be more readily recruited and less costly to train and deploy. Some crisis support services utilise volunteers to connect with people seeking help and perform crisis intervention functions including safety checks.²⁴ Investment in crisis support services can improve a health system’s overall capacity to meet the needs of all people.

The WHO Mental Health Action Plan²⁵ lists Universal Health Coverage as a key foundation, reinforcing the importance of equity for all people to access mental health services and related social services; this includes psychosocial supports, notably in emergencies and disaster response and a global target has been established for 80% of countries to have in place systems that are prepared to meet these needs.

Crisis support services address the equity aspects of Universal Health Coverage. Typically, crisis lines and online chat or text services, as well as face to face crisis support, operates to welcome all people regardless of their background, circumstances or the context in which they seek help. Promotion of crisis support to people in groups otherwise face difficulties in seeking help can be done in ways that are psychologically and culturally safe as a targeted mental health and wellbeing strategy, for instance people from ethnic, gender, sexuality, age and status minorities. Crisis support services are offered equally to all close the access gap. The increases in the use of crisis support services during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this responsiveness.²⁶ Crisis support services are a humanitarian response to all in need.

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