

# Best Practice Guidelines for Drug Helplines

Adapted from a document produced by the FESAT Best Practice Exchange Partnership, a European membership network of drug helpline services ([www.fesat.org](http://www.fesat.org))

## A. Policy and Practice

### 1. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Best Practice

- More drug helplines stick to the principles of anonymity and confidentiality. They are often considered as key values of helpline work. It helps to create a safe environment within which callers may feel able to speak most freely.
- Helplines should treat information about both callers and helpline workers in confidence, as far as possible. If there are limits to confidentiality, these should be explicitly stated and examples given of the implications for callers and helpline workers.
- Child Protection, where the needs of children are prioritized and abuse is reported, may carry legal or ethical obligations in your country. This therefore must be considered when dealing with calls from or about young children.
- In order to best support callers, helpline workers and other workers, confidentiality should be within the service and not between individual callers and helpline workers. If your organization offers more than one helpline, you might wish from time to time to discuss calls with helpline workers, supervisors or managers from these other services.
- It is good practice to inform the public, on your website and in your promotional leaflets, about your service policy on anonymity and confidentiality. This will help to clarify things for potential callers and creates safety for callers too.

2. **Neutrality** - A service which is neutral or non-judgmental deals with callers needs without bias or agenda. Helpline staff will 'meet the caller where they are at' and support caller in a completely neutral way offering any and all information and support available or required. This includes information on safer drug use, abstinence and all other relevant topics.

Issues to consider

- Harm reduction versus abstinence debate: Where does a helpline 'draw the line'?
- Non-judgmental helplines attract a great diversity of callers, including drug users.
- Are there political issues to consider? Does your helpline have to follow a particular policy of government or an institution? Do you follow a particular standpoint when it comes to drug testing or legalizing drugs etc.

### 3. Low Charge vs Freephone

Best Practice

- Usually, freephone numbers yield high numbers of prank/test calls. This can have a significant impact on your service availability and can be very challenging for staff. However, if considering this you still feel that your target group would be better served by making the number free to all, then it would be best practice to make it freephone.

- Staff training and support should address any negative impact from excessive prank/test calls.
- You could consider the issue of prank/test calls when promoting your service in schools, youth clubs etc.

#### **4. Working with Volunteers**

##### Best Practice

- A volunteer charter should be drawn up in conjunction with volunteers, stating clearly the organization's responsibilities and ethos and also clarifying the role and expectations of volunteers.
- The organization needs to be aware of its responsibility towards the volunteers and the voluntary work. Volunteers should be aware of their responsibility for the voluntary work.
- The organization provides the volunteers with adequate resources and an infrastructure that is clear and accessible.
- There should be initial training before starting helpline work and ongoing training at least once a year. Ideally there should be an induction period, after which you discuss any issues, concerns or gaps with the new worker.
- Supervision and support needs to be regular and accessible.
- The organization ensures that volunteers are adequately involved within the organization and that there is a democratic style of working within the volunteer group and in the work with professionals.
- The organization ensures that new members in the group are wholeheartedly welcomed and that the voluntary work is suitably recognized.
- The volunteers should observe the guidelines of the institution or the volunteer group and act in keeping with these objectives.
- The aim of improving the quality of life of other people presupposes that the volunteers are willing to develop themselves. Self-reflection and transparency are important factors for volunteers.
- The volunteers should be aware of their possibilities for also supporting the ideals and goals of volunteering outside of the voluntary work.
- If a volunteer decides to leave your organization, it is a good idea to have an 'exit interview'. This provides an opportunity for the organization to evaluate its management of volunteers and where things can improve. This also gives an opportunity to give and receive positive feedback.

#### **5. Challenging Calls**

##### A. Repeat/Frequent Callers

##### Best Practice

- Each organization needs a clear policy for dealing with repeat callers. If your service is not designed for repeat callers, you should clarify this with callers in an appropriate way and let them know of an alternative source of support, if possible.
- Use 'we' statements. This discourages the development of dependence on one

particular helpline worker. The use of an alias and strict rules about self-disclosure can also help with avoiding the creation of unhealthy relationships between the caller and themselves.

- After an agreed period of time, all repeat callers should be discussed confidentially at team level and an ongoing policy for dealing with these callers agreed. This policy might include a time or frequency limit, advice on how the call should be dealt with and support suggestions for helpline workers (eg. Teaching skills on how to respectfully end conversations with repeat callers).
- Repeat callers can be hard to identify because some of them create different characters in order not to be easily recognized. This might be avoided by discussing calls with colleagues or asking a colleague to listen in on calls sometimes.
- To assess the extent of the problem and the impact on the helpline, a record should be kept of the number of times the regular caller has called the service, as well as some additional information on the time of day he or she calls and the theme of each call.
- Utilize outside supervision or support where necessary, if a caller is presenting needs that are beyond your skills base eg. Consult a psychologist or psychiatrist about callers with mental health problems.

#### B. Prank/Test Calls Best Practice

- Each organization should have a specific policy for dealing with these callers so that a consistent message is always being given from helpline workers.
- Your service policy could include the following:
  - a. Offer the caller the opportunity to make a genuine enquiry of your service, provided they are not too abusive to do so.
  - b. Explain the goals and areas of action of the helpline.
  - c. Explain that what the caller is doing is negative and unproductive and inform caller that they should only call if they have real questions to address the service.
- Having covered all of the points above, the call can be terminated (hang up).
- After hanging up, the helpline worker should discuss the call with colleagues and with the team's supervisor, always including in that discussion the emotions that he/she went through dealing with the call.
- This policy should also include guidance on self-care and support for helpline workers.
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#### C. Sexual Gratification Calls Best Practice

- Each organization should have a clear policy for dealing with sexual gratification calls and this policy should be known to all helpline workers. Some services might even use a specific script for these calls.
- This policy should either
  - i) involve the use of specific language and phrasing to keep caller focused on support and information or
  - ii) to terminate the call, in a clear and respectful way.

- Whichever policy your service uses with sexual gratification callers, it is important to be consistent, not to react emotionally during the call and to seek support after the call.
- This policy should also include guidance on self-care and support for helpline workers.

#### D. Suicidal calls Best Practice

- Suicidal callers demand special attention and handling from the helpline staff. Always ensure that staff have support during and after these calls.
- As with all calls, it can be a good idea to limit the discussion to 3 issues. This can help with keeping both the helpline worker and caller focused.
- Maintain a calm supportive tone with caller.
- Try to establish caller's supports, if there is someone that they can talk to or explore the idea of contacting a specialist service after the call.
- If possible discuss these calls at group/team level also.
- This policy should also include guidance on self-care and support for helpline workers.

### 6. Remote Working

#### Best Practice

- The quality of service provided to the public should not be affected negatively by the fact that the call/email is being dealt with by a remote rather than office based worker.
- Ensure that your service has the technical tools to manage remote working.
- Clear rules on accessibility and communication between the remote worker and the helpline are required.
- The remote work needs a dedicated work space, a computer and a phone (land) line.
- Implement a strategy to guarantee both support and evaluation means for remote working staff or volunteers.

## B. Support and Supervision

### 1. Debriefing

#### Best Practice

- Debriefing is an essential part of best practice in helpline work.
- Debriefing can be provided by a peer, a supervisor or an external source of support.
- It is important that a safe and trusting environment is created for Helpline workers so that they feel able to talk through such calls, without judgment etc.
- It is best if there are protocols for crisis debriefing in each service.

### 2. One to One Supervision

#### Best Practice

- As with all supervision, one to one supervision should happen on a regular basis, ideally monthly.

- The supervisor should be suitably skilled and should be aware of the specificities of helpline work.
- A supervision policy should be written by each organization and the terms of the supervision arrangements agreed and understood by both individuals involved.

### **3. Live Call Supervision**

#### Best Practice

- Some form of regular live call supervision is recommended as it offers ‘real time’ insight into the helpline workers practice and actual examples that can be discussed.
- As with all supervision, live supervision should happen on a regular basis, ideally monthly.
- The supervisor should be suitably skilled and should be aware of the specificities of helpline work.
- A supervision policy should be written by each organization and the terms of the supervision arrangements agreed and understood by both individuals involved.
- When audio recording of helpline calls is considered, this should be done in accordance with the national legal requirements.

### **4. Intervision/Group Supervision**

#### Best Practice

- The group setting needs to be ‘safe’, with agreed ‘ground rules’ such as trust and confidentiality.
- Group supervision or intervision requires openness and sincerity. Participants have to be prepared to share their choices for a certain approach, personal issues and emotions in a group.
- Participants should know in advance what they can expect from intervision sessions, not only so they will be able to prepare themselves, but also to avoid confusion and negative surprises. The following issues of a session should be clarified and communicated in advance to the participants: scope, frequency and duration of the sessions as well as number of participants and eventually the maximum number of cases to be discussed.
- Group supervision or intervision requires a chairperson whose role and tasks are clearly defined. Ideally, this chairperson should come from outside of the organization.

### **5. Self Care/Burnout Prevention**

#### Best Practice

- Acknowledgment and acceptance of helplines’ policy and values.
- Having a balanced workload.
- Development of the “feeling of belonging” in the group of helpline workers.
- Agency – Administrator supervision and support.
- It is best if Helpline workers feel valued within the organization.
- Effective supervision, support and training can contribute to and reinforce a healthy environment and prevent or help deal with burnout.
- Ongoing training can act as a refresher for helpline workers.
- Practice ‘Controlled Emotional Involvement’ (Biestec, 1992) during a call.

- The helpline is staffed by up to two people at a time. The Helpline workers support each other and help each other when crises arise. Debriefing after crisis also helps prevent burn out.
- Helpline workers can also be supported by Supervisors on-call on a 24hour basis. If or when a crisis arises, and they feel they have exhausted any option in dealing with it, they may call the supervisor on shift.
- If a worker is over-stressed and over-stretched, it may be helpful to offer the option to continue working but in a changed role for a period or to take a leave of absence if needed.

## C. Technology and Reporting

### 1. Phone Technology

#### Best Practice

- Always use a headset with helpline phones. Using a regular handset for extended periods of time can cause back and neck strain. A headset also allows workers to work hands free and often guarantees better background noise reduction compared to a regular telephone receiver.
- Ideally each helpline worker should have their own headset, for hygiene reasons.

### 2. Computer Technology

#### Best Practice

- Consider your service needs carefully before spending a lot of money on technology. Free of charge and downloadable software (often called 'Freeware') can offer good alternatives (eg. [www.techsoup.org](http://www.techsoup.org)).
- Good computer technology can make the workings of your service more efficient, can help keep information, etc. up to date and can increase the number of people who access your service.

### 3. Websites

#### Best Practice

- You need to search the internet for reference to your helpline online regularly to ensure that whenever it is mentioned that the information is accurate, up-to-date and appropriate.
- A website can be like your Helplines shop window: a great advertisement or a poor reflection. If you have a service website it needs to be kept up to date.
- Consider your target audience when designing your website and the features that you have on it.
- If possible make your website interactive.
- Consider using Social Media such as Twitter, Facebook, Blogs and video sharing networks to enhance your helplines visibility. However it is important to consider anonymity and privacy issues if you want to create an online social network. Therefore protocols for best practice should be developed that deal with these issues.

### 4. Online Counseling/Chat

The prominence of the Internet necessitated that those involved in addressing the

psychosocial needs of people, both young and old, embrace its potential. This new field of working also offers new possibilities for engaging people, delivering information and counseling and therefore acts as an extension of traditional counseling services. Online counseling can serve as an ideal opportunity for a first contact and can aid in overcoming initial inhibitions. It is both a bridge towards face to face counseling and a standalone method of counseling support. The terms email counseling and email support are both used for the same thing. Both refer to supportive communications between a professional (using counseling skills) and a client. For more details, please consult FESAT Publication: *Guidelines for Online Counseling*.

Definition: Helpline email, chat and text support services use the written rather than the spoken word, to communicate information and support to service users. They offer accessibility and anonymity to service users and are particularly good for offering support to those who might be less comfortable telephoning a helpline. Online counseling, usually happens through email where a query or concern is sent to a service, a reply is drafted and sent back to the 'client'. There may be this single piece or there may be further exchanges. Online support may consist of the repeated exchange of written documents, making it an interactive standardized process. The Internet is both the location of the online support and a technical prerequisite for the different types of online support.

There are a number different types of online support listed below. In all, communication is in written form and regardless of modality, the same standards apply.

Best practice when setting up an online email or chat service

When offering an email service the people who contact you will expect a reply within a certain delay. The organizational impact of embarking in an online service is often underestimated. It is not something you just add to your daily telephone work; it has demands and consequences of its own.

- Privacy and data security are important when dealing with email counseling. It is best practice to always have server side encryption, where all information is stored directly on the institution's servers and access is only granted to clients and counselors. Hence, information always remains on the institution's web server and cannot be read from third parties.
- Technical requirements:
  - A safe, stable and secure internet connection;
  - A suitable work space;
  - A chat application (downloadable or even better, web based);
  - A registration system for all chats.
  - A 'Back office' with features such as timesheet, statistics, logging, etc. Protocols to instruct the IT department at the office or remote working.
  - Protocol to regulate the chats in a standardized way.
- Privacy requirements:
  - Access to the data related to the visitor/client (IP address, characteristics of the chat session, possible names or addresses, etc) should be limited to co-workers and the administrator of the chat service only.

- The computers should be secure and password protected.
- Copyright and ownership of the content of the application.
- IP addresses can be hacked. By using specific software the addresses can be encrypted so that it cannot be directed back to one single IP address.
- It is important that staff dealing with online support are consistent in their use of language style and skills. Specific training is needed for staff. Skill building is necessary.
- Have an automatic response to email queries, which states your service policy around how long it will take for them to receive a tailored response to their email. Your service may decide to have a quicker response rate for support queries than for information queries.
- With chat, it is best to publicize your usual response time and to keep it to the shortest time possible, to avoid frustration.
- Use a model such as 5 steps model below:
  - Step 1: Welcome/introduction
  - Step 2: Clarifying clients' question
  - Step 3: Defining the aim of the call
  - Step 4: Deliberating on the aim
  - Step 5: Closure
- Apply double check system to all responses, getting a nominated Helpline worker to check what you have written before you send it.
- Everything you write online will remain visible for a long time, so beware of possible consequences of your words, even though you may be protected by a disclaimer. With emails even more than with chat sessions, service users may decide to print or even forward your answer and consider it as some kind of written 'proof'.
- Ensure that you have good technical support and backups in case there is a breakdown in service or staff are unavailable at short notice.
- Set boundaries to online contacts:
  - The preferred duration of a chat conversation should not exceed 30 minutes.
  - When offering email counseling, it is useful to set a limit to the number of emails or replies the same person can send you on the same topic. If necessary you may also ask the person to contact you via the telephone or consider other options.
  - When providing an email service, make sure that service users are made aware that email is not suitable for emergencies, as it may take several hours before an email is read eg. when sent in the middle of the night.
- If a service user become abusive, you may want to block the person by blocking the IP address (enciphered or not). But always inform them that you are doing that.

## Reporting

Data can be used for the following:

- To better understand queries that come into the service.
- To learn more about the realities for drug users.
- To analyze trends in drug use (especially when comparing data over the years).
- To help the development of strategies of intervention and prevention of drug abuse.
- Publicity for your service.
- To assist in sourcing funding.



## **5. Call Records**

### BestPractice

- The call record needs to be clear and easy to complete.
- The call record needs to gather relevant, objective pieces of information, such as age, gender, relationship to the drug user etc. Subjective pieces are of limited value eg. Do you think that the caller was motivated to change?
- The call record needs to be reviewed for relevance annually.
- Data from call records should be inputted automatically or manually in to a format where the figures can be analyzed e.g. An Excel database or a tailored call logging system package

## **6. Information Resources**

### BestPractice

- It is best to have a computerized services database which can be accessed easily, searched thoroughly and updated at any time.
- It is best for helpline workers to have access to the internet. This is particularly useful, when researching new drugs etc.

## **7. Data Management**

### BestPractice

- Some attention should be given to databases, electronic forms and reporting. All of your databases should comply with laws governing data protection. Also if you want to use information collected from calls either as statistics or when the same person calls again, then a computerized database is the most effective way. There are different common database programs (e.g. Access) which can be used as a tool to build your own database system. Usually this work requires helpline professionals to define the requirements of the system and a professional to do programming.
- Data protection – Data security is also essential when we are dealing with somewhat delicate information. All data/computer systems should be protected against computer viruses and hackers. You must have good anti-virus programs and reliable firewalls to protect your clients.
- You need also to take care of backing up your records. Backups can be automated so that it is made daily. The backups should ideally be stored somewhere other than your office. They could be stored on a server or using a virtual storage option such as is used with Cloud Technology.