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Responding to Abusive Behavior During 988 Conversations

Abusive, harassing, or sexually motivated contacts to the Lifeline can be very challenging to manage, both clinically and operationally. Some contacts can become quite disruptive to the operation and exhausting to the staff. A provocative individual can evoke certain reactions from counselors even when experienced and well-trained. Some crisis counselors may endure an abusive or harassing conversation and continue attempting to try to make progress with such an individual for an extended period of time. Some will have a lower tolerance for what may be perceived as a prank or abuse of the service and quickly end the contact, even if it may be premature to do so. Striking the balance between empathy and limit-setting is an ongoing challenge for counselors and supervisors. Below is 988 Lifeline's guidance to crisis counselors and center supervisors/directors on how to best assist such contacts:

Guidance for all types of abusive or harassing contacts:

- **Remain compassionate while utilizing consistent and appropriate boundaries:** The goal is to always listen and acknowledge the person in crisis' concerns, conduct an assessment and determine an appropriate intervention, including when to end the conversation.
- **Prepare crisis counselors to recognize and handle these types of interactions:** Offer training on how to respond to abusive/harassing contacts during onboarding. Ensure that the training provided helps crisis counselors to differentiate between individuals who are angry or have a mental health issue that affects their ability to moderate certain behaviors versus individuals that are truly inappropriate and crossing boundaries.
- **Prepare crisis counselors to recognize repeat abusive/harassing contacts:** Centers may decide to circulate a brief description of an individual engaging in abuse to the team in order to prepare consistent language and approach. This information may be tracked in the contact center database, CRM, or EHR as appropriate. It may prove to be necessary for a designated person to keep abusive/harassing contact information updated and distributed to all appropriate staff/volunteers.
- **Directly ask if there is any current emergency:** *"Is there an emergency right now?", "Are you currently having any thoughts of suicide?", "Have you done*

anything to harm or kill yourself today?”, “Are you having any thoughts of harming or killing anyone else?”

- **Clearly outline options:** *“On this line, we can offer the following options: provide referrals, set up a mobile crisis team visit if appropriate, or get help to you right away by calling 911.”*
- **End an abusive or harassing conversation when necessary:** Firmly state you will be ending the contact due to inappropriate conduct which cannot be tolerated on the hotline. *“Based on the program policy, I will have to end the call/chat/text if we cannot communicate in a productive way.”* If this occurs multiple times with an individual, state the center is keeping track of the contacts in order to take any necessary action (even if it is not clear if something can be done yet due to an unidentifiable or untraceable number/IP address.)
- **Utilize resources for self-care after challenging conversations.** This may include debriefing with a peer or supervisor or engaging in personal self-care activities. Maintaining awareness of the contribution these types of conversations may have to experiencing compassion fatigue and burnout can help crisis counselors continue to respond to individuals in an effective and empathic manner. For additional information about self-care, please refer to the Practice Guidelines page *Crisis Counselor Support* located in the NRC.

Guidance for handling specific types of harassing or abusive behaviors:

[Verbal Abuse/Yelling/Cursing](#)

[Prank Contacts](#)

[Harassing Contacts](#)

[Phishing/Spoofing attempts](#)

[Sexually Motivated Contacts](#)

[Swatting](#)

Verbal Abuse/Yelling/Cursing

Crisis counselors should also be provided training to distinguish between individuals in crisis who may utilize angry expressions to communicate their distress where validation and de-escalation may be appropriate versus those who are engaging in abuse towards the crisis counselor.

- Do not raise your voice if the individual is raising their voice. Stay calm and provide space for them to voice their concerns.
- When using chat or text, refrain from using all capitals or exclamation points. This can come across as aggressive.
 - Please note that chat/text visitors may use capital letters at times in their conversations and as long as the content of their conversation is appropriate, there is no need for redirection in these instances.

- Avoid directives such as, “Calm down,” or, “I need you to stop yelling.” Allow the individual to express their distress and share the reason for their outreach. They may present with less hostility once they feel that someone is actively listening to their concerns and not dismissing them immediately due to how they present those concerns.
- Remember to take a person centered approach, and focus on what the individual believes is the biggest crisis/concern.

Guidance for supervisors when attempts to de-escalate or set appropriate

boundaries are not effective: Crisis counselors should not be subjected to ongoing abuse or harassment. Additional steps may be needed to address behaviors that do not benefit the individual in crisis and have a negative impact on staff/volunteers. Ensure that crisis counselors are empowered to end abusive/threatening conversations and feel comfortable bringing their concerns to the attention of supervisors/managers.

- When center technology allows and the issue cannot be de-escalated, callers with abusive behaviors may be routed to an extension with a message saying the use of the line is inappropriate and to call 911 for any emergency once they have been assessed as not at risk. Collaborate with the 988 Lifeline to ensure all other possible interventions have been utilized without desirable results in changing the behavior before enacting this solution for 988 Lifeline callers. See the guidance document *Utilizing a Voicemail Box for Abusive/Harassing Callers* located in the Abusive and Harassing Contact Support Practice Guidelines page on the NRC.
- If a phone number is accessible, a supervisor may consider calling a repeatedly abusive contact back (or stepping in to take over a chat or text conversation) to discuss what is taking place, stating what action the center plans to take (enacting limits, notifying authorities, etc.). Sometimes a conversation with a supervisor or director may have an impact, since it alters the controlling pattern the individual has been attempting to establish. If the supervisor’s outbound number is different from a generic outbound number for the center, take steps to protect the privacy of the supervisor’s direct contact number.
- If possible, reach out to local law enforcement agencies to explore what options might be available in locating and speaking to a harassing or threatening contact. Pressing charges may be a necessary option if the harassment or abuse is severe.
- If these limits are not effective in addressing the pattern of abuse or harassment, please reach out to the 988 Lifeline. For phone call support, please reach out to askstp@vibrant.org. For chat or text related needs, please email LCCT@Vibrant.org or use this [form](#) to request a meeting. Please note that SAMHSA and Vibrant do not allow centers to block or ban individuals from contact to the 988 Lifeline by phone, chat, or text.

Harassing Contacts

Harassment can include a variety of behaviors such as a high volume of contacts in a short or extended period of time, repeatedly calling, texting, or chatting and disconnecting, making back to back calls/chats/texts with the intention of preventing other contacts from coming through, connecting crisis counselors with one another or outside agencies via conference calls to tie up more staff/volunteers, or repeated contacts verbally berating/harassing crisis counselors while denying need for other resources or crisis concerns.

- Understand that an individual in crisis may be making frequent contacts due to distress or frustration. Listen, validate, and allow the individual time to express if there are needs that haven't been understood or addressed in previous contacts.
- If the individual declines crisis assistance and any need for resources while continuing to contact the 988 Lifeline repeatedly, remind them of the scope of services and options for emergency assistance. End the conversation if the individual denies further needs.
- Alert a supervisor or manager if frequency of contacts is impacting ability to answer other individuals in crisis.

Sexually Motivated Contacts

Individuals sometimes contact crisis lines to meet needs that are inappropriate for and beyond the scope of a crisis line. Conversations may be characterized by sharing of fantasies or graphic sexual content to derive sexual arousal and gratification. Individuals may also attempt to develop relationships with crisis counselors through flirting or requesting personal information. It is important to provide guidance to crisis counselors during training on how to distinguish when an individual is utilizing the crisis line for inappropriate purposes versus contact where the individual may be questioning aspects of a relationship causing crisis or questioning aspects of their own sexuality.

- Treat all contacts as appropriate until shown to be otherwise.
- Reflect and focus on feelings. Use silence and keep responses brief.
- If the individual is requesting to speak with a counselor of a particular gender, do not grant the request. See the *Requests for a Different Crisis Counselor* document on the Active Engagement and Collaborative Relationships page of the NRC for further guidance on these requests.
- Point out indicators that the individual may be using the service for sexual stimulation and inappropriate behaviors as they occur.
- Maintain a neutral tone and allow the individual to respond to any direct observations made about the purpose of the contact/behavior.

- Review indicators and behaviors when they are discovered and end the conversation in a firm and respectful manner.

Prank Contacts

It's important to remember that while they can be frustrating, a prank contact today might be tomorrow's crisis contact. Pranking might be a way to feel out the service for an underlying need. The way the crisis counselor handles the prank could set the stage for the individual to feel safe reaching out in the future with a legitimate need. Some of the more complex pranks may be indicative of other serious mental health concerns for the individual, and if the initial pranking can be treated with clear and consistent boundaries, the opportunity may present itself to address the underlying mental health need in that behavior.

- **Obvious Pranks** - joking, giggling, clear indicators of a fake situation created for entertainment value
 - Remain empathetic in tone
 - Point out the negative effect of this behavior on the 988 Lifeline
 - Firmly end the conversation, inviting them to reach out again if they ever need a crisis service
- **Not So Obvious Pranks** - possibly real sounding scenarios, sophisticated but with inconsistencies and red flags that something isn't right
 - Gently point out and explore potential indicators that something doesn't add up in the individual's story while remaining empathetic in tone
 - If you notice multiple indicators that the contact might be a prank, and exploration of the concerns doesn't yield an explanation that makes sense, address directly with the individual.
 - Offer the opportunity to explore what really prompted the individual to reach out.
 - End the conversation if no need for resources or crisis support is identified.

Phishing/Spoofing Contacts

Spoofing and phishing are scam activities with the purpose of obtaining personal information. A common presentation is to reach out multiple times while requesting to speak with various staff members for vague reasons. They will often disconnect if told that there is no staff member by the name they request, if pressed for further information as to the nature of the request, or if told they have a wrong phone number.

- Directly inform the individual that they have reached a crisis hotline and it is inappropriate for them to continue to reach out. Bring the phone number or VPN

to the attention of a supervisor or manager for further investigation and to take additional action as needed.

Swatting

Swatting is the false reporting of an emergency to public safety with the intent to get a (“SWAT team”) response to a location where no emergency exists. This is triggered by false reporting of a serious law enforcement emergency in an attempt to obtain the largest response possible such as a home invasion, bomb threat, hostage situation, or a false report of a mental health emergency such as reporting that a person is at imminent risk of suicide or violence. Individuals engaged in swatting may contact a crisis center as a third party and request that the center contact the police or emergency dispatch to respond to the situation they are reporting.

- Remember that crisis counselors should utilize the least invasive intervention whenever possible and consider involuntary emergency interventions as a last resort when imminent risk has been determined. See the *988 Lifeline Suicide Safety Policy* on the 988 Clinical Guidance page of the NRC for further guidance as needed.
- Crisis counselors should follow their center’s policies and protocols regarding violence or public safety threats. Guidance can also be obtained on the Violence and Threat Management page under Clinical Guidance on the NRC.
- Crisis counselors should treat information being provided by a third party as real, while also remaining aware of any obvious signs of pranking.
- Follow procedures for working with third parties and work with the individual to directly call 911 if possible. If they decline to contact 911 directly or via conference call with the crisis counselor, carefully examine whether or not the reasons they give for not being able to make the contact themselves make sense. Consult with a supervisor or manager if you have concerns about the validity of the information the individual is reporting. See the document, *Third Party Guidelines, located on the Active Engagement and Collaborative Relationships* page of the NRC for further guidance.