A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF
Online 💬hat helplines for youth
FROM A COUNSELLOR´S PERSPECTIVE

🔍 What is required to set up and operate a chat helpline? ✕

To provide a **chat specific training** for counsellors that is continuous and adapted to the target population.

To ensure counsellors possess **empathy** and strong **listening skills.**

To implement **supervision programs** that offer counsellors feedback and emotional support.

To use technology that is **accessible, up-to-date, secure, and tailored to the needs** of youth.

To employ technology that facilitates **data gathering** for report writing, service self-evaluation, and training material development for counsellors.

To maintain service **availability for as many hours** as possible, **adapting to the users´ needs.**

To clearly explain the service rules: how it operates, what the service is for, and what information will be recorded.

To save **sufficient funding** to develop **long-term plans** for the service.

Networking and coordination with **other helplines** and **health institutions** to facilitate referrals, share training resources and collaborate effectively.

To develop **customized marketing and dissemination strategies** that ensure the target population is aware of the service.

What are the key strengths of a chat helpline?

FOR USERS

Chat helplines are **accessible** to the youth, enabling them to get help when needed, immediately and from anywhere.

Communicating via chat is **natural for youth,** some may feel **aversion towards making a telephone call**, making chat a **first step** towards seeking other support services

Chat is a **silent channel,** allowing users to seek help discreetly without those around them knowing

Chat helplines can be **anonymous,** making users **feel safe sharing** their concerns.

Chat helplines provide a **listening ear** for youth who may not have anyone to talk to. Even if they visit other services, they can receive **additional support** through chat.

FOR COUNSELLORS

Chat helplines are in **written language** allowing counselors to better **reflect** on their **interventions.**

Counselors can **contact supervisors** or other counselors for support **while conversing** with users, seeking resources or suggestions on what to do.

Chat services provide **training opportunites** for counsellos, helping them **gain experience** for their future.

Counsellors´ anonymity allows them to establish boundaries and control what they choose to reveal

FOR ORGANIZATIONS

Chat services enable organizations **to connect with,** and **support** a **larger** number of **young** people.

Chat services enhance the **organization's corporate** image by aligning it more closely with the **preferences** of young people and the **digital** landscape.

Chat helplines can **gather data** that can be used for service quality analyses, dissemination activities and conducting research.

Chat services can be offered at a **lower cost** to the organization, especially if they already operate other helplines.

What are the main issues associated with a chat helpline?

Some of these problems are inherent to any chat service

Problems >>>>> ## Potential solutions

Problems: The absence of **non-verbal communication** means that counselors are unable to demonstrate that they are **actively "listening."**

Solutions: **To train counsellors** to identify emotions, more **exploration work,** or **refer** users to another communication channel.

Problems: **The pace of** chat-based communication is **slow,** leading to **longer conversations and extended response times.**

Solutions: **to provide referrals to phone services**, deliver more **targeted interventions,** and **explain** to users that it may take time...

Problems: **Limited service availability**, especially when **queues** form causing long wait times for users.

Solutions: **To refer users to other helplines** and **inform** them about the opening hours and waiting times.

Problems: Being contacted by people **not belonging to the target group:** Individuals who prank, contact by accident or surpass the age limit.

Solutions: In case of pranks: **Confront** the user and **explain the** importance of the service. Offer **training** for the counsellor
Other: **Referrals** to other helplines.

Problems: **Ghosting:** Users abruptly leaving the conversation or becoming silent.

Solutions: **To train counsellors to interpret silences** and send users **reminders** of their presence or the option to contact the service at **another time.**

Problems: **Users getting stuck in online helpseeking:** Not **actively** working to **solve** their problems or **reaching out** for professional assistance.

Solutions: **To transfer users** to offline professional help, while providing **accompaniment**.

Problems: **Negative feelings from uncertainty**: Questions like "Am I being **effective**?", "Why are they **ghosting**?", and concerns about users in emergency situations since **follow up is not possible.**

Solutions: **To offer team support,** adress feelings of worry and frutation in sessions with supervisors or counsellors peers.

Problems: **User anonimity:** Counsellors can't gather enough data for follow-up or emergency assistance, and they can't know who they are talking to.

Solutions: To access the user's **IP address** or **gain their trust** so they voluntarily provide the necessary information

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Problems: **Technology issues:** Users can't access the same conversation if they close the chat, the platform is limited by legal requirements and a tech device and WIFI are needed to contact the service.

Solutions: **To inform** users about access issues or **provide internal resources** for both users and counsellors.

Problems: **Issues outreaching youth:** Some chat services reach only a **small portion** of the youth and they rely on **constant marketing efforts** to maintain adequate visibility which is not long term sustainable.

Solutions: Dissemination through social media (Tik Tok, instagram...) utilizing minimal text, short videos, humor..., a **catchy platform design** that attract youth, and **increased funding for marketing** initiatives.

Problems: **Shortage of counsellors** due to budget constraints and a limited availability of volunteer support

Solutions: Allocate a **recruitment budget** to increase staff; **refer users** to another counselor or temporary AI; Request users' **emails** for contacting when a counselor becomes available

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- **Lack of funding** is associated with many of the identified problems such as the inability to update the interface and insufficient staffing.
- Securing funds is challenging due to the **need to prove efficiency**.
- **Collecting data** can demonstrate the effectiveness of the services which can help **secure additional support** in the future

What will the future of chat helpline services be like?

The use of chat helplines is expected to **increase over time.**

Chat helplines will **never replace offline services**. They serve as a **complementary service providing** support in emergencies, **accompaniment** with in-person care, as a **first point of contact**...).

Chat services can add to traditional services by **improving accessibility,** thereby helping to overcome the barriers that youth face in accessing mental health care.

There is a common desire to create a supportive **network among helpline organizations**.

There are **controversial** opinions about the use of **Artificial intelligence (AI)** in chat services.

There is a common feeling that AI **cannot replace human counsellors**, as it lacks the "humanity" (warmth, empathy) essential for these services.

Users often express a preference for human interaction and **may question counsellors about their authenticity**, rejecting AI involvement .

AI can offer new **opportunities**, when implemented within a **strong ethical framework** and with **thoughtful planning** regarding its use.

Potential uses of AI include **initial assessment tools** and **filtering tools** that recomends tailored services.
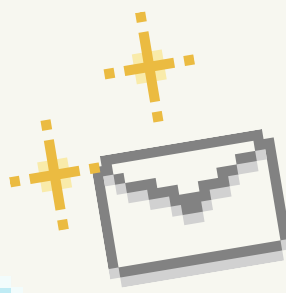
"We would like to express our most sincere gratitude to the chat service counsellors and the organizations that made this project possible, for their time, dedication and willingness to participate.

Thank you"

in CHAT-YOUTH

Scan me for more information!