

## Self-Disclosure on the Crisis Line

When and how do we use our personal experiences to effectively help our callers? There is some research that self-disclosure and peer support is potentially helpful to callers, but it can also be counter-productive if not handled well. What are some safe ways to use lived experience in crisis center practice?

Empathy, warmth and genuineness and clear purpose should be the guiding factors. While lived experience (yes, I am an alcoholic; yes, I have been depressed, etc.) can relay a level of understanding, it is also dangerous to assume that one experience mirrors another. For veterans, for example, while it can be helpful to state you are also a veteran, there is a danger in assuming that everything after that is common – just because your military experience was one way doesn't mean it was the same for another.

While inclusiveness of people with lived experience about suicide and mental health in crisis centers is encouraged, there was mixed discussion from our Standards, Training and Practices committee about the best way to share that experience with callers if at all, especially regarding the advisability of disclosing past attempts to callers. There was consensus that training of crisis counselors about any kind of self-disclosure is critical.

Here are some general guidelines and considerations for crisis center staff.

### **Safe Disclosures**

There are several things to take into account before sharing parts of your story or how they might relate to that of the caller's. Most importantly, you want to make sure not to share anything that might put you or other counselors' privacy or safety at risk.

- Safe to disclose your first name or a consistent pseudonym to help develop rapport
- Safe to disclose general location (city, state) of your crisis center (people want to know they haven't reach a call center in India for example)
- Safe to disclose veteran status (given previous caveat)

### **DO NOT DISCLOSE**

- Crisis counselor last names (unless to law enforcement)
- Crisis counselor shifts
- Crisis counselor personal contact information

Note: As always, please defer to your individual center's policies, procedures and training around self-disclosure.

### **Considerations Before Making Any Other Self-Disclosure**

In addition to safety for the counselor, it is also incredibly important to assess the reasoning behind sharing personal experiences with a caller or contact. What's the purpose of doing so and will it help increase the likelihood of the contact staying safe? Your motivation behind self disclosing should align with that of the caller to ensure an effective counselor-contact relationship and to help move them toward safety for now.

- What is the motivation to share this information? To build the relationship? Or is it to impress, to vent, or meet a need of my own?
- Is my experience relevant for this caller's situation? Will what I have to share offer new information, show a different perspective or demonstrate empathy?
- Is it a good point in the call to disclose my personal experience? It may not be best practice to self-disclose in the beginning of a conversation but rather consider whether or not you have built rapport, whether or not the visitor has presented a pattern that may indicate a more dependent response to self-disclosure and whether or not they are at imminent risk for suicide.
- Is there a way to share my experience that does not turn the focus of the call to me? Can I share the same ideas in a more general or neutral way?
- Instead of it "It helped me to \_\_\_\_" say "some people who have experienced \_\_\_\_ have found it helpful to try \_\_\_\_\_, do you think that might be something you would want to try?"
- Instead of "I know you want to attempt suicide but I've experienced hard times too and it always helps me to just think "This too shall pass", say "I'm concerned for you and I care about your safety and well-being"
- Can I express empathy and understanding of a similar experience just through my tone and offering validation/normalization for the caller's experience without sharing my specific related experience?

### **Redirection/Refocusing Strategies**

Counselors should have a plan for handling self-disclosures that don't take the call in a productive direction (sharing confuses or inhibits the caller from talking more about their experience, caller becomes fixated on how the crisis counselor handled the specific issue and continues to seek personal information and opinions).

- Redirecting the caller to focus on themselves – have some stock phrases ready
- Apologizing if caller becomes more inhibited and refocusing conversation
- Good to incorporate practice of this skill in training/roleplay before needing to use it in real life

### **Examples:**

- "I generally don't share personal info. but I'm here to talk about ways we can help you and I'm glad you reached out today"
- "I understand that you're curious about what I would do in your situation but everyone reacts differently. I want to help you come up with unique coping skills that you feel comfortable with"
- "It seems like I may have turned the conversation to me. Let's talk more about how you're feeling right now."