SOMEONE TO LISTEN: INCREASING YOUTH HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIOR THROUGH A TEXT-BASED CRISIS LINE FOR YOUTH

William P. Evans  
*College of Education and College of Cooperative Extension*

Laura Davidson and Lorie Sicafuse  
*Interdisciplinary Program in Social Psychology, University of Nevada, Reno*

A multi-method evaluation was conducted to assess the TextToday pilot program, the nation’s first crisis line with the capacity to accept text messages. Objectives of the evaluation included how successful the system was in meeting the needs of underserved youth and how effectively the social marketing campaign reached the target population with information about the texting crisis service. The service was found to increase youth help-seeking behaviors among our pilot study population. Implications for replication, integrating texting into community crisis services, and future research are discussed. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
Though suicide/crisis hotlines have a long history as one of the most frequently utilized and effective services for adults in crisis, adolescents and young adults rarely access them. The number of unique calls by youth to crisis calls is notoriously difficult to estimate (Gould, Greenberg, Munfakh, Kleinman, & Lubell, 2006); however, in Nevada, only 2%–3% of the nearly 100,000 calls to the Crisis Call Center from 2005–2008 were from individuals aged 5–18 years (Evans, Davidson, & Sicafuse, 2009). These statistics parallel those reported by other call centers across the country (e.g., Gould et al., 2006; Offer, Howard, Schonert, & Ostrov, 1991; King, 1977). Although youth who use hotlines are almost unilaterally positive about their experiences (e.g., King, Nurcombe, Bickman, Hides, & Reid, 2003), low use rates indicate the need to enhance the connection of crisis services to youth.

In the last decade, text messaging has become the dominant form of communication among 12–17-year olds (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). The popularity of text messaging is attributable to a number of its unique features. Many text-messaging plans allow unlimited texting for minimal costs (Faulkner & Culwin, 2005), and youth report that texting is a more immediate, private, and comfortable way of communicating than calling or talking face-to-face (Lenhart et al., 2010).

In an effort to increase youth help-seeking behaviors by creating a service that uses a communication medium that youth prefer, Educational Messaging Services (EMS), the Crisis Call Center, the University of Nevada, Reno, and the Nevada Office of Suicide Prevention have worked together to develop one of the nation’s first crisis lines with the capacity to accept text messages. The TextToday program also featured a social marketing campaign in Nevada schools to advertise the new service to area students. This article reports the findings from an evaluation of the pilot of this service in Nevada and its associated social marketing campaign.

**TEXTTODAY PROGRAM DESIGN**

**TextToday System**

The TextToday program uses an online system to monitor texts into the Call Center. Counselors communicate to youth on their cell phones through a computer-based platform. The system uses a secure encryption process to encode information sent back and forth between texters and counselors. By clicking on a particular phone number, staff can view all texts sent between counselors and youth for every occasion the individual texts into the system. Staff also can view the current status of the conversation, any notes written about a particular texter, and the dates and times that youth texted into the program.

To access the system, texters type a keyword (e.g., “listen” or “care”) to a 6-digit phone number. Staff then sign into the system and send the texter a welcome message (e.g., “Hi there, how can I help you?”) and the intervention text conversation proceeds according to the four- to six-step paradigm for Telephone Crisis Management (TCM) services (Kalafat et al., 2007). According to this paradigm, counselors first attempt to establish rapport with clients before identifying the caller’s problem and assessing their risk for suicide. Second, counselors explore the affect of the client. Third, counselors assess the callers’ coping mechanisms and options for support. Finally, counselors work with clients to develop alternative solutions to their problems, and refer them to other resources specific to their problems. If callers are identified as acutely suicidal, counselors can initiate emergency services by tracing the phone call. This paradigm has been adapted to the unique circumstances of calling interventions, which are marked by a short duration...
within which to complete an intervention and an absence of facial cues on which to assess affect and emotional state (Kalafat et al., 2007).

One of the unique features of a text-based platform is accessibility to texting case histories, including a full transcript of all previous text conversations as well as any notes other staff have written about the texter. Based on this information, the counselor can write a message back to the texter and begin a new conversation or continue a previous one as needed. If texters decide to opt-out of the system by texting the word “stop,” then their transcript is archived in a database separate from any case history that might have been saved previously.

**Social Marketing Materials**

The social marketing materials used to advertise the TextToday program to area youth follow a Narrowcast marketing model that uses targeted messaging in private areas to increase health-seeking behaviors among a specific demographic. As the location where youth spend a majority of their day and where a large proportion of “at-risk” students regularly appear, schools are one of the most direct ways to reach youth with information about important health services. The school-based TextToday Narrowcast program employed a variety of poster displays in private areas, like boys’ and girls’ restrooms and locker rooms, ensuring that students could read the posters in absolute privacy. Take-away cards with the TextToday number and other local crisis resource numbers are attached to each poster display in case youth want to take program information home for later use. The materials were tailored specifically to each school based on the demographic makeup of the school site, the age of the students, the primary problems faced at each school, and the local resources available to youth in crisis. The TextToday program was launched at thirteen schools in Northern Nevada for this pilot study.

**TEXTTODAY EVALUATION DESIGN**

Researchers were contracted to conduct an independent, multimethod evaluation of the TextToday program to determine (a) how effective the system was in meeting the needs of the currently underserved adolescent demographic in Nevada, and (b) how effectively the social marketing campaign strategy reached the target population with information about the Crisis Line’s expanding services. Because Crisis Call Center counselors were the first in the country to pilot a text message-based crisis platform, understanding their experiences with the program was essential to identifying any possible barriers to successful replication and expansion of the program. Thus, the mixed-method evaluation reported here comprises three major components: (a) analysis of data collected by Crisis Line counselors and the online system to identify the target population using the system and the system’s functionality; (b) focus groups with youth to assess the service and social marketing campaign strategy; and (c) focus groups with counselors to understand how effectively they transition to a text-based communication platform.

**METHOD**

**Procedures**

Institutional review board approval was sought and obtained for all procedures and instruments used in this study. Researchers conducted 18 hour-long, semistructured focus
Table 1. Demographics and Youth’s Evaluation of Focus Group Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Native American (n = 20)</th>
<th>Rural Jr. (n = 65)</th>
<th>Rural high (n = 18)</th>
<th>Urban high (n = 10)</th>
<th>All schools (n = 113)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean)</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>14.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>62.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>18.5%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
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<td>1.5%</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
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<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiethnic</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has texting on phone</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>81.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus group experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in moderator</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic coverage</td>
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<td>2.61</td>
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<td>Comfort</td>
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<td>2.20</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note. Exit survey questions are as follows:
(1) Were you confused about the discussion? (1 = totally confused; 3 = not at all confused); (2) How much did you feel you could “open up” or trust the focus group leader? (1 = I completely trusted the focus group leader; 3 = I did not trust the focus group leader at all); (3) Was there something you thought about but didn’t say? (1 = the topics were not covered well; 3 = the topics were covered very well); (4) How comfortable did you feel about participating? (1 = very comfortable; 4 = very uncomfortable); (5) How well did you understand the topics discussed? (1 = did not understand the topics at all; 3 = I completely understood the topics); and (6) How similar were the responses given by everyone, to the way you felt? (1 = not similar at all; 3 = very similar).

In addition to youth focus groups, investigators also conducted two sets of focus groups with all eight of the Crisis Call Center counselors who responded to texts during our pilot study. The first focus group interview was conducted 9 months after initial implementation of the program, when the system received an average of one to two texts per week. The second occurred 12 months after initial implementation, when the program had been more widely disseminated and counselors received an average of four to five texts per day.

All TextToday counselors also completed postintervention assessments (see Table 2) about the demographics of texters, the reasons why they contacted the Crisis Call Line, and the outcome of the conversation. These assessments provided data on how effective the service was in meeting the needs of youth in crisis. In addition to these data, information
on how many texts were sent and received by the Crisis Call Center, when they were sent, and how many texters had used the system were pulled from the online system to gauge the length and duration of text conversations and how many times individuals repeatedly texted into the system.

Goals of these analyses included assessing (a) how many individuals used the text line, (b) the average number of texts exchanged between counselors and texters, (c) which keywords were used to opt into the system, (d) texters’ demographics, (e) issues texters typically report, (f) the outcomes text conversations, and (g) the average time period of a text conversation.

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Focus groups with youth and crisis counselors. Focus group interviews with youth occurred approximately 3–4 months after the TextToday service was launched at each school. Interviews were conducted during lunch and advisory periods in private classrooms. All sessions were audiorecorded unless parents specified on consent forms that they did not want the interviews taped. Forty (35.4%) parents did not permit taping of their child’s interview. As a result, five focus group interviews were conducted without audiotaping, though the focus group moderator did take summary notes throughout the interview. Appendix A outlines the questions asked at each focus group session. As previously mentioned, two focus groups with crisis counselors also were held. At the end of each focus group, all participants completed a brief paper-and-pen exit interview questionnaire regarding their experiences in the focus group and basic demographics (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity).

Transcripts of focus group interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method, a form of grounded theory in which coders engage in discussion and form consensus throughout the analysis process (Glaser, 1965). Focus groups themes emerged through the use of a SWOT analytic framework, in which the internal strengths, internal weaknesses, external opportunities for improvement, and external threats to improvement of a program are identified. As data were gathered, responses were coded, and the researchers reviewed interview transcripts for overlapping themes. Themes emerged from the data and were placed into the predetermined categories of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This systematic characterization allowed for the identification of appropriate strategies for utilizing the strengths, addressing the weaknesses, seizing the opportunities, and mitigating the challenges of the TextToday service prior to full implementation throughout the state.

RESULTS

Uptake and Utilization

The TextToday program received a total of 377 texts by 172 individuals from May 6, 2010, when the program was launched at the first school site to June 30, 2011, when the pilot ended. In total, 53.1% of all text conversations were from “repeat” texters who texted into the system on multiple occasions. Approximately 23.8% of youth texted into the system two to three times, and 5.8% of youth texted into the system more than three times (and up to nine times).

Text conversations ranged from 1 minute to 23 hours and 19 minutes, though an average text conversation lasted approximately 2 hours and 46 minutes (standard deviation [SD] = 4 hours and 2 minutes). The number of texts sent by counselors in comparison to the number of texts sent by the texter were proportionate, with texters and counselors both sending an average of 18.4 texts per conversations. The length of text conversations ranged from 1 to 123 texts sent by a user in a single conversation. Approximately 25.8% of conversations were “long conversations,” with more than 25 texts sent by the user. Another 49.1% of conversations were medium length, with between 6 and 25 texts sent by the user and 24.0% of conversations were short, with only one to five texts sent by the user.

Table 2 displays texters’ demographic characteristics. As discussed later in this article, the lack of voice cues from texters notably limits counselors’ ability to collect demographic information, particularly when conversations are shorter in length. However, approximately 53% of all texts into the TextToday program were from females, while only 12.5% of texts were from males. Even accounting for counselors’ inability to obtain
information on gender from 35% of texters, these findings do suggest that females were the dominant users of the program.

Given that the TextToday program was primarily marketed towards youth, nearly 60% of texters were between 15 and 17 years of age, although age information could not be obtained from 27.3% of text conversations. Approximately 15% of texters were older than 18 years of age. In terms of increasing help-seeking behaviors among youth, a review of all calls to the Center from 2005 to 2009 revealed that calls from youth younger than 18 years of age averaged 446 per year (Evans et al., 2009). For the calendar year of 2011, a period in which this pilot study had ended and the service was launched in an additional four schools (adding one urban high school and three urban middle schools, for a total of only 17 schools with service exposure), 616 unique youth texters contacted the Center. This is in addition to youth who called the Center, and represents a 28% increase in average youth contacts to the Center. By the spring of 2012, when additional schools were exposed to the service, the Center was receiving over 3,600 incoming texts per month from 137 unique youth texters. The Center slowly has been rolling out the service to additional schools because they are wary of being overwhelmed with texts, but are aiming for statewide implementation during the 2012–2013 school year.

The majority of TextToday users were not in crisis when texting into the system. In fact, 59.4% of texts were for information or support, while only 7.7% of received texts were classified as at-risk for suicide. Another 26% of all texts ended before a resolution could be reached, most frequently because texters terminated the conversation by not returning a text or by opting out of the system by texting “stop.” None of the 98 texts coded as “no resolution” were identified as at-risk for suicide by a counselor. Approximately 7.4% of all text conversations were “pranks,” although this might be an underestimate, given that it is often more difficult to differentiate between prank and serious texters without any voice cues. Four texters required a welfare check or a follow-up, in which counselors initiated a text conversation with a user after their initial conversation check on their well-being due to being identified as distressed or at high risk for suicide. Two texters accessed the line explicitly to thank a counselor for helping them.

Few service referrals were provided to texters because few youth expressed interest in outside help, and they tended to report fewer serious issues that might require outside assistance. In total, only 28 individuals were referred to an additional service. Of those, 11 were referred to a school or mental health counselor (e.g., school counselor, psychiatric hospital), six were referred to services to help fulfill basic needs (e.g., Salvation Army, free legal services, homeless shelter, job help), five were referred to another hotline (e.g., lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender-specific hotline), and six were referred to other miscellaneous services (e.g., school nurse, child protective services).

**Issues reported by texters.** Twenty-nine texts were received from 22 unique texters that were identified as at-risk for suicide by staff. Of those, 20 had a low likelihood of lethality, six had a medium likelihood, and three had a high likelihood of lethality. At the conclusion of the text conversation, two texters remained at a high level of lethality, two medium and one high lethality texters were de-escalated to a low likelihood of lethality, and 19 remained at a low likelihood of lethality throughout the course of the text conversation.

The majority of texters accessed the TextToday line seeking information or support and were not in crisis. Table 1 describes the primary issues reported by texters over the course of the conversation. Note that the data are not discrete, and users could report more than one issue during a given conversation. Most texters (54.9%) reported at least one type of interpersonal conflict during the conversation. Roughly equal proportions
of these conversations involved issues with a family member (30.4%), romantic partner (34.8%), or peer/friend (30.4%), although 4.3% of text conversations centered around an issue with another relationship (e.g., coworkers and teachers). Another 27.3% of texters reported having concerns about another person, and 27.9% of individuals reported a mental health problem. Physical health concerns were reported by 7.7% of texters. In the brief notes counselors provided about each texter, the majority of physical health concerns centered around fears of pregnancy or concerns about contraception.

**Youth Focus Groups**

Table 2 describes results from focus group exit surveys with youth and the demographic breakdown of participants at each school. The majority of youth reported a high understanding of the focus group topics, trusted the moderator, believed they had similar opinions to that of the group and thought that topics were well covered. The majority of youth in the focus groups (81.6%) reported having cell phones with text capabilities. Most students reported that all or most of their friends have cell phones. Nearly all youth who had a cell phone reported that they had either unlimited text messaging capabilities on their phone plan, or had some texting capacity on their phone.

Most youth reported that they preferred to text their friends rather than call them, citing the “ease” and “speed” of texting. Many other youth felt that the confidentiality of texting facilitated more intimate, honest conversations and helped them feel less “embarrassed,” “shy,” or “awkward.” As one high schooler commented, “I’ve noticed with high school students talking in person is really hard, even talking on the phone. With texting you can tell them everything.” Another advantage to texting is the ability to maintain privacy by limiting the chance that someone, particularly parents, could overhear the conversation: “Yeah my mom and dad can’t hear what I’m saying so it’s better.”

**Reaction to TextToday service in schools—awareness and understanding of the service.** All youth interviewed were aware of the location of the social marketing materials in the school. However, understanding the program’s purpose varied according to where the posters were placed (e.g., in bathroom stall or outside of bathroom stall) and whether the school administration had formally announced the program launch at school (e.g., during a school assembly or classroom presentation). In general, youth read posters placed inside the bathroom stall more closely than posters placed by the sink or in the hallways, and consequently remembered more details what the line could be used for, how to access the line, and what models/text appeared on posters. Youth who received a formal presentation about the launch of the TextToday program at their school could identify more features of the TextToday line.

Nearly all youth could describe how to access the TextToday line (“Text ‘Listen’ to, uh, 8-whatever”). Youth provided a number of possible reasons why someone their age would want to use the system, from the more serious “if you’re hurting or scared,” “feeling suicidal,” or “depressed,” “abuse” to the more mundane “just to talk,” “to vent,” or “if you keep getting stuffed into a trash can.” When asked what youth might want out of such a service, many reported that they just wanted “someone to listen” so they could “express their feelings” and receive “advice,” “positive thoughts,” and “encouragement” from Crisis Call Center counselors.

**Reaction to design and placement of marketing materials.** In general, youth reacted positively to both the placement of the posters and their design. Most youth thought the posters
and cards had an appropriate tone and were relatable. Youth thought the poster models looked like they could attend their school, and expressed appropriate emotions for the subject matter. Some youth suggested that the posters should show a variety of youth, so that “all cliques” are represented. Other youth thought the clarity of the posters needed improvement and that they were too “busy.” Marketing materials were modified based on students’ feedback.

Youth understood that locating social marketing materials in the bathrooms afforded them more privacy: “The reason they put it there is so that no one will get teased about taking one [a card]” and was a location “most people walk by.” The placement of social marketing materials in bathrooms, however, also provided students more opportunities to vandalize the materials. Vandalism of materials, however, was less pronounced at schools where students (usually a student council group or other student representative group) were given control to monitor the displays, rather than faculty or facility staff.

**Primary issues faced by students.** Students mentioned both major and minor interpersonal conflicts as the issues most frequently faced by people their age, corroborating findings from the online system. Bullying, school fights, arguments with friends, and rumors were identified as significant and pervasive problems for students at most schools, with nearly all youth at the two rural schools reporting problems with cyber and text-based bullying. Students also discussed conflicts with parents and significant others as serious issues faced by people their age, including having questions about sex that they did not feel they could discuss with parents: “I can’t talk to my parents about any of that stuff. Especially my dad.” Other youth mentioned conflicts with teachers and schoolwork as serious sources of stress. Besides interpersonal conflicts, problems with drugs and alcohol, self-mutilation and cutting, peer pressure, domestic abuse and violence, divorce, and suicide/depression were some of the most frequently mentioned issues faced by youth.

**Perceived benefits of TextToday service—increased confidentiality and privacy.** Youth in all focus groups discussed the benefits of confidentiality. Many preferred a text-based line specifically because they would not be identifiable by voice cues and no one could overhear their conversations. One student noted that such confidentiality might encourage youth to disclose more details about their problems: “People don’t really want to talk to someone who is near them because then they’re afraid that they’ll judge them and spread it. But if it’s just some random person on the phone then they can just let it all out cuz they know they’ll never see that person again. Because when you’re talking to each other it’s kind of anonymous.”

**Counselors less judgmental than other supports available.** Youth also commented on the benefits of talking to “strangers,” rather than someone who knew them more intimately. As one middle school boy noted, the Crisis counselors might be less judgmental than friends, family, or school-based resources: “Yeah and it’s pretty cool, like, talking to someone you don’t know because they’re going to think about it but they’re not gonna, like, judge you on it.” Another student commented that an outsider’s perspective could be beneficial: “I think it would be good to talk to a person who doesn’t know you, because they could give you a different perspective... someone you know might judge you or give you their perspective based on what they know about you.” Other students liked the idea of talking to counselors because they might be more receptive and less likely to overreact:
Sometimes, you know, you just want someone to talk to. You don’t really want them to fix the problem but you just want someone to talk to . . . . Sometimes I feel like if you just talk about it, then they’re [e.g., friends, family, other supports] going to do something, and it might be towards some kind of negative action.

Besides the TextToday program, youth reported a notable lack of adult resources available to help them during crises. Although many youth discussed problems with their parents, particularly their mothers, many of them felt that their parents “judged them,” “did not understand them,” “got mad at them,” overreacted to issues youth discussed with them, or considered their problems mundane teen “drama.” With few exceptions, school-based resources, including teachers and school counselors, were unilaterally dismissed as possible supports for youth in our focus groups. Many youth expressed concern that teachers and counselors would immediately involve their parents if they sought out their help: “They say there’s this student-teacher confidentiality thing, and then you end up finding out you’re part of some other big thing, and then they bring your parents in.”

Although some youth mentioned that they occasionally “Googled” advice on a particular issue, few identified a specific website or community organization they could access during a crisis. In fact, a surprising number of youth reported feeling like they had no trusted friends or other resources available to help them, as one middle school girl commented, “I usually just cry and deal with it alone.” Thus, for many, TextToday was one of very few trusted resources they could use during a crisis or recommend to friends in need. As one high school girl exclaimed in reaction to the launch of the TextToday program at her school, “I personally was like finally! Something that this school needs!” The majority of youth in our focus groups reported that they would recommend the service to a friend in crisis, both because “I might not be able to give them the help that they need” and “Because it’s someone to talk to privately.”

**Convenience and ease of a text-based service.** As expected, youth noted that a text-based line was more appropriate than a call-based line because texting is the preferred mode of communication among people their age. One high school female highlighted that the text-based platform allowed youth to text in privacy, 24-hours a day: “Also, you can text anytime. Honestly, if I were using the text line, I would wait until I was alone and I was sure no one could hear me.”

**Belief that line could help youth who might not otherwise seek help.** Many youth noted that the added privacy could help increase the likelihood that youth who might not otherwise feel comfortable talking to people might access the TextToday line: “Well, truthfully, I think it’s a . . . good little thing . . . cause uh . . . it can help other kids that are not so strong and whatever.” Several youth recognized the importance of talking about problems before they become a crisis: “Like, from my own experience, and seeing others . . . I think when people don’t vent and talk about their problems, everything builds up and then they rage . . . so this [the texting service] is probably a good thing to help people get their problems out.”

**Perceived barriers to using TextToday service—concerns about confidentiality.** In all focus groups, youth frequently expressed concern that the line might not be confidential. Students’ concerns related both to their astute observation that many technologies are often not as secure as we would like to believe (“won’t it show up on my phone bill?”) and their awareness that adults are legally obligated to intervene if someone is imminently at-risk
for suicide: “Well, people might be worried about texting adults... about whether they
could trace back your number. That’s probably why they might not text in.” Many youth
expressed concern about the possible implications of someone finding out that they had
used the line, including fear that “they would get in trouble” and that their parents might
read their text messages.

Fear of stigma for using the line. In line with concerns about the confidentiality of the line,
several youth believed that there was some stigma associated with using the TextToday
system, including risk for “teasing” and “embarrassment.” At all schools, youth reported
that people would jokingly hand out the cards to students to designate them as someone
in need of counseling: “Yeah, sometimes people just give them out in the hallways to be
funny.” As another student commented, even taking a card might carry social repercus-
sions: “But you know, there are always going to be those people who are like a******s,
and see someone taking one of those cards and then start making fun of them.”

Reaction to program among those who had used it. Of the 113 students interviewed, only eight
reported knowing someone who had used the program. Those who reported using it
admitted to doing so just to “test” the system and did not have a serious concern to
discuss. However, crisis counselors were instructed to treat all texts as a potential crisis,
even those that were obvious pranks. As a result, even some youth who had “pranked” the
TextToday line had positive feedback about their experiences:

Well, they [participant’s friend] just tried it to see how it would work. They did
it as ... I guess you could say, test it or prank, just to see how it would work and
if they would really answer. Went on for quite a while ‘til [the Crisis counselors]
asked if it was serious and then they called it off. They liked it. They [the Crisis
counselors] texted back pretty fast so that kinda shows like ... they like care.

As discussed later in this article, Crisis counselors reported that many youth who began
by “pranking” the system later texted in with real concerns, perhaps having established
that someone really would respond to their texts into the TextToday system.

Focus Groups With Crisis Call Center Counselors

Strengths of the system. In general, counselors showed remarkable facility in adapting to the
text-based communication platform. In the follow-up focus group, all counselors reported
feeling comfortable with the system, and that they could effectively conduct interventions
with texters with roughly the same efficacy that they could conduct interventions with
callers to the center. Counselors identified a number of features of the TextToday program
that had improved their capacity to meet the needs of youth in the community. As one
counselor commented, “I think we’re connecting with kids we never would have. Some of
them do call [the Crisis Line], but it’s just not as prevalent as with the texting ... texting
is their comfort level. It’s how kids communicate.”

Ability to adapt phone-based strategies to text line. All staff involved in the pilot of the TextTo-
day system had several years of experience conducting crisis interventions over the phone.
Counselors noted that their prior experiences provided a strong toolkit of communication
strategies and suicide prevention models to rely on when conducting text-based interven-
tions, including how to build rapport, assess suicide risk, and determine appropriate
referrals. For example, several counselors had adapted their phone-based “mirroring” strategies, in which a counselor matches their voice and tone to the client’s to help build rapport, for use with texting: “I also think its really important matching your sentences to them. Like, using abbreviations if they are, or using emoticons if they are. That’s all part of building rapport, I think.” Others noted that, rather than relying on voice cues to identify an individual’s emotional state, they instead analyzed the speed with which youth texted to assess the seriousness of the text conversation: “The ones who respond quickly seem like they have an idea in mind when they text. Something that they are definitely concerned about.”

Counselors noted that two of the most significant advantages to a text-based line over a phone line are counselors’ anonymity and the ability to review records of transcripts with each texter. As one counselor commented, “On the phone, sometimes when you get someone who’s maybe from a younger generation they might say to you, ‘you have no experience. How can you help ME?’ So on a text, that anonymity really helps.” Other counselors noted that some youth seemed more comfortable openly discussing their problems via text than they were over the phone: “I had this girl on the phone who was very . . . she seemed more willing to give me information [via texting] than other girls her age on the phone.” Having a transcript of all text messages shared between counselors and texters also emerged as a useful training tool, enabling program directors to identify exemplar texting interventions and allowing staff a means to assess the quality of their own work: “I think we could learn more from the experience if we could see those conversations. Like, ‘oh, okay. Here maybe I should have said this instead of that.’”

Weaknesses of the system. Counselors still struggled to adapt to some of the features of a text-based system in spite of its many advantages and similarities to the phone-based system. Because counselors are often trained to rely on voice cues to assess a caller’s emotional state, counselors expressed concern that they could not readily distinguish a crisis text situation from a non-crisis text situation:

I’m more comfortable than I was and it’s much more easy to build rapport but I do still struggle to figure out what emotions they’re actually feeling. I think building rapport is about equivalent as on phone but it’s just difficult to get a read on their emotions. An out-of-control caller is very obvious on the phone but an out-of-control texter not so much. The people who text in have more time to think about what they want to say, so it’s not as easy. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, but it can make it more difficult to figure out whether they’re saying something sarcastically or not.

Additionally, because texting does not require constant back-and-forth and conversations often spanned over hours or even days, counselors often expressed frustration about the length of time they had to wait between text messages. This discontinuity often required staff to multitask between text conversations and even between text conversations and calls to the Crisis Center:

I did a 3–4-hour text session pretty consistently back and forth a few days ago. But I still have to multitask because the duration is so much longer. But, either way it’s 3–4 hours, so I have to be doing other things. I can’t just focus on her. And then I have another one texting in and the phones are ringing. It gets crazy.

One of the other major concerns counselors identified was the number of youth who “pranked” the system, often texting in with “the most horrific thing they could think of to see how they would respond.” A lack of voice cues often made it difficult for counselors to
distinguish pranks from more serious texting situations. Saved records of previous texting transcripts, however, helped staff identify inconsistencies between youth’s stories from one conversation to another, making identification of prank texters easier over time. Pranks occurred most often just after the service was launched at each school and dissipated after the first couple of weeks. Counselors also noted that a substantial proportion of youth who initially “pranked” the system later texted in with a more serious problem, perhaps having determined that the service was active and that counselors would listen to any problems they might have.

Probably the only thing I can recommend is to be patient with them even though it’s obvious that they’re messing with you. Because frequently that’s the same kid who will come back and tell you what’s [really] going on . . . even if you use some gentle confrontation, understand that they’re very likely going to come back, as long as you’re gentle with them, and tell you a real problem.

Finally, as the amount of missing demographic data on texters demonstrates, staff noted the difficulty in collecting even the most basic information about texters, particularly when text conversations were short. Staff often rely on voice cues to estimate a caller’s gender, age, and even ethnicity. This was often difficult in the texting environment, although counselors grew increasingly better at collecting demographic information as they gained experience with the system. Staff also noted that assaulting youth with a series of demographic questions often raised suspicions about what counselors might do with such information, suggesting that a certain level of rapport must be reached prior to asking detailed questions about a texter’s location, age, or socioeconomic status.

If it’s a real conversation, it comes out. You have to have patience. That’s the one thing I’ve learned. You can’t rush this because if you do they’ll stop and they’ll be gone. But if you go kinda slowly and ask them mainly open-ended questions they will respond.

Opportunities to improve the system. Because a text-based platform is a new addition to the traditional crisis phone intervention system, Crisis Call Center staff had to shift their expectations about how text conversations would operate. For example, staff initially expected to use the text-system as a gateway to a phone call conversation. When users texted in with an acute crisis, the goal of the text conversation would be to obtain permission from the texter to call so that staff could conduct a more thorough and personal intervention. Yet when counselors successfully convinced crisis texters to move to a phone-based conversation, they quickly realized that the individuals clearly felt uncomfortable talking on the phone and preferred texting. Further, counselors realized that crisis interventions could just as easily be conducted via text as they could by phone. These realizations resulted in a shift in intervention protocol such that counselors no longer attempted to shift text conversations to the phone line and instead conduct all interventions and follow-up using texters’ preferred conversation medium.

Given the low utilization of crisis lines by youth, counselors had little previous experience conducting interventions with children and adolescents. Thus, counselors’ additional experiences working with youth yielded a more thorough understanding of the

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1This issue, however, appears to be improving as counselors gain additional experience with the TextToday system (Gant-Reed, Personal Communication, September, 2012)
issues youth reported in comparison to adult users. For example, counselors noted that adult callers to the line often seek counseling, financial, or other services and tend to have higher rates of mental health problems than youth have reported to date. In contrast, counselors reported that youth often texted into the line to discuss issues they felt they could not discuss with their parents, like sex, or because they did not know who else to turn to for advice.

Additionally, the focus group conversations themselves helped provide staff with a forum to share strategies for building rapport, deciphering text lingo, and gathering demographic information on youth. One staff member shared a document she created with some of the most common emoticons used by youth and their meaning, while another shared several websites she had discovered to help her translate text lingo and slang. Another staff member shared that she would “purposely call them a boy or a girl and then they’ll correct me” to help determine a youth’s gender, while another noted that youth often were more receptive to her question about what grade they were in than they were to a question about how old they were.

Challenges to improving the system. Although all staff reported feeling increasingly comfortable over the course of the pilot using the text-based platform to conduct crisis interventions, certain challenges to improving the system remain. Most notably, staff reported difficulty connecting youth to other resources. Many youth appear to text the line because “they want someone just to talk to and vent. They really don’t want referrals. It’s been really clear to us that they’re not looking for referrals.” However, many other youth could benefit from referrals to counseling or other support services. Unfortunately, as one staff member highlighted: “Most services kids can’t access, they’re underage, they don’t have transportation. You know, it takes parents to get them to most services anyway.”

DISCUSSION

Evaluation findings from the TextToday program reveal that this text-based crisis line has increased help-seeking behaviors of adolescents and young adults. Although 172 individuals texted into the system during this pilot study, by the spring of 2012 over 300 youth per month were accessing the system for support, representing a sharp monthly increase in youth contacts to the Center over the previous 5-year period. More than half of all texts into the system during the pilot were by “repeat texters,” those who texted in more than one time, with some youth texting in as many as nine times within a 2–3-month period. In schools in which administrative support for the program was particularly high, between 6.3%-12.3% of the student body later texted into the program.

Focus groups with Crisis Line counselors and data on texters suggest that many youth text the system when they are bored, just want to talk, or to discuss an issue they do not feel comfortable discussing with parents, friends, or other support networks. In fact, interpersonal conflicts, and particularly those with romantic partners emerged as the primary issue youth wanted to discuss with counselors. This coheres with research suggesting that interpersonal conflicts are the single greatest stressors reported by youth (Seiffge-Krenke, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2009). Adolescents in romantic relationships tend to report more conflict than those without romantic partners (Laursen, 1995) and manifest more symptoms of depression (Joyner & Udry, 2000). That said, 29 acute crisis texts were received during the pilot and were successfully de-escalated from a suicidal state. Further,
counselors successfully initiated follow up text conversations with many suicidal texters, suggesting that a text-based platform is effective for both crisis and noncrisis texters.

Overall, students who participated in focus groups about the text messaging system believed that a text-based crisis line offered many advantages over other resources available to them. Students expressed concern that counselors, teachers, and other school-based resources would discuss issues students brought to them amongst each other and even with other students. Further, although many youth felt they could discuss their problems with their parents or friends, many others did not feel comfortable talking to their parents about issues, particularly when the topic was sensitive, might cause their parents to involve school officials or other parents, or might get them in trouble. Thus, most students perceived the TextToday system as more confidential, more convenient, and more accessible than other resources available to them. Although some youth expressed concerns that Crisis counselors could “track” their phone numbers and involve their parents or school officials, the majority of youth believed that the line was confidential, and would recommend the service to a friend in crisis.

Crisis counselors became increasingly adept at conducting interventions using the text-based line over time. By the second focus group, most counselors believed that they conduct text-based interventions as well as traditional phone-based interventions, and that they could communicate with youth more effectively through texting. Both access to transcripts of previous interactions with a texter and the lack of voice cues that might signal to youth that they were older adults were identified as major advantages of a text-based line. That said, the lack of voice cues limited some counselors’ ability to complete demographic profiles on youth, particularly when the conversations were short, or when youth texted the system as a prank. In fact, in as many as 35% of text conversations, counselors were unable to identify gender. Over time, however, staff developed more effective ways of gathering demographic information, such as structuring questions in ways that are most likely to receive a response. In general, longer text conversations enabled staff to collect more demographic information naturally. Although demographic information is not always essential to conducting an effective intervention, counselors did note that some basic information is helpful in structuring age and gender-appropriate responses.

In addition, the nature of texting technology means that counselors often must multi-task when responding to texters in crisis. Future studies should work to identify strategies to increase the amount of demographic data staff can collect and help counselors more efficiently juggle ongoing text and call interventions simultaneously.

Students believed the Narrowcast social marketing model effectively and privately communicated the purpose of the text-based system as well as how to access the service. The Narrowcast model, however, requires extensive maintenance, including regular rotations of posters between schools and in-house oversight to replace damaged or missing takeaway cards. Although effective for the pilot to establish the program’s credibility, a less intensive marketing campaign is needed as the program expands.

The evaluation of the pilot phase of the TextToday program has a few limitations that warrant discussion. First, the evaluation relies on participants from a small number of pilot schools exposed to a focused marketing strategy, thus the lack of equivalency comparing pilot data to prior statewide call center statistics needs to be underscored. Second, our sampling procedures and reliance on self-report limits our understanding if the most vulnerable youth were reached or whether counselors successfully provided each youth with the information, support, or intervention needed. Although youth were asked during focus groups to report on their friends’ experiences using the program, very few discussed such information.
In spite of these limitations, a text-based crisis line appears to offer a number advantages to a traditional phone-based line, particularly in its ability to provide a safe, confidential, convenient, and cost-effective method for youth to reach out for help during a crisis or when they need support or information. This led to increased youth help-seeking communication with the Crisis Center. In the past decade there has been a surge in text-based health promotion efforts aimed at youth, including in the field of suicide prevention (e.g., Texas IPhone app, Lifeline, Veteran lifeline project). Current findings provide additional support for the use of text-based communication platforms in health promotion and crisis services with youth. As texting is increasingly adopted across all age groups and research accumulates about the potential benefits this technology has to increase users’ disclosure, reach previously underserved populations, and improve crisis services overall, texting platforms have the potential to emerge as a central component of community crisis services.

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Some to Listen...  


APPENDIX

Moderator Guide for Focus Groups With Youth

Cell phone usage: “How many of you have a cell phone?”
Probe 1: Do most people you know have a cell phone?
Probe 2: What kind of cell phone do you have?
Probe 3: Do you have unlimited texting?
Probe 4: Who pays for your plan?
Probe 5: When or who do you usually text and when or who do you usually call?

Social marketing awareness: “Who here has seen a poster or flier at the school about a text message crisis line?”
Probe 1: Ask youth what they think about the materials
Probe 2: Do they think the message was appropriate for people their age
Probe 3: Is advertising in bathrooms an effective means of reaching youth during schooltime?
Probe 4: How well are the text posters maintained? Are they ever vandalized? If so why?
Probe 5: Can you describe how to access the crisis line?

Possible uses of text line: “What do you think you could use a crisis line for?”
Probe 1: Do you know anyone who could and might use such services
Probe 2: Do you think talking to someone at a crisis line could help people their age deal with their problems?
Probe 3: What kinds of problems do people their age face?
Probe 4: Have you ever heard of the Crisis Call Line?

Benefits of text line: “What are some of the benefits of a text-based crisis line?”
Probe 1: Do youth believe text messaging is an appropriate means for youth to obtain help during a crisis?
Probe 2: Would they or their friends be more or less likely to text-message or call someone during a crisis?
Probe 3: What are some of the benefits of a text-messaging line?

Barriers to use: “What do you think might prevent some youth from using the text messaging line?”
Probe 1: How frequently youth might use a text-message line over a phone call line during a crisis?
Probe 2: Would they believe what they say during a crisis line conversation would be confidential?
Probe 3: How would your parents react if they heard your school had this text program in place?
Probe 4: When do you prefer to talk to an adult about a problem you’re having versus someone your own age?
Probe 5: What do you think your friends would say if you told them you had used the program?

Current resources available: “What resources (friends, family, organizations, school services, websites) do people your age currently use when they are in crisis or have problems?”
Probe 1: What type of information do youth seek out when in crisis?
Probe 2: Who do they talk to about their problems?
Probe 3: What organizational services (school services, websites, crisis lines etc.) they are familiar with to help people their age.
Probe 4: If you had a friend who was thinking about hurting themselves, what would you do?
Probe 5: What would you do if your friend was being bullied?
Probe 6: If you could pick one person to talk to about a problem you’re having, who would it be?

Likelihood of using program in future: “Could you see yourself giving one of these cards to a friend if they had a problem?”
Probe 1: Without naming any specific names, do you know anyone who has used the crisis line already?
Probe 2: How might you approach a friend you are concerned about with information about the crisis line?

Future implementation: “Can you think of any other places where we might advertise this service to youth your age?”