

THE IMPACT OF ONLINE CRISIS VOLUNTEERS

How the experience of 100,000 text-based mental health responders in four countries impacts volunteers, communities, and the global mental health emergency



SEPTEMBER 2024



Executive Summary

There is a global mental health emergency that has grown more acute over the past decade. As this crisis deepened, four nonprofits around the world recognized the power of text-based support to help people in mental health crises with the help of online volunteers.

Together, these partners have supported over 6 million people in 14 million text message conversations across the US, the UK, Canada, and Ireland. They have trained over 100,000 volunteers since 2013, one of the largest mental health volunteer training programs in the world.

While these four partners – Crisis Text Line in the US, Kids Help Phone in Canada, Shout in the UK and spunout in Ireland – have made a significant impact on the lives of countless children, young people and adults, this report shares the first concrete evidence of the impact this unique model has additionally had on the lives of volunteers themselves and their communities.

For this report, our international research team surveyed 3,100 volunteers across four countries, making this one of the largest studies on the impact of text-based crisis volunteering. Here is what we learned.

Our international research team surveyed over 3,100 volunteers across the US, Canada, the UK, and Ireland, making this one of the largest studies on the impact of online crisis volunteering.

Crisis volunteering via text:

1 **Contributes to personal growth**

Volunteers develop skills and knowledge through training and engaging with texters and clinical supervisors that help their own personal growth and development.

2 **Fosters connections and makes people feel less lonely**

Volunteers feel more connected to their friends and family, and volunteering makes it easier for them to meet new people outside of the platform.

3 **Influences career pathways and contributes to global mental health capacity**

This is particularly true for younger volunteers under 25, many of whom are inspired by volunteering to pursue careers in mental health fields.

4 **Inspires agents of change**

Volunteers actively apply the skills and knowledge they acquire with their friends, families, and work colleagues. This extends the reach of the partner organizations beyond their platforms and contributes to tackling mental health stereotypes and influencing positive social change.

5 **Strengthens societal resilience**

Volunteers develop active listening, empathetic communication, and increased compassion for others. These life skills heighten their awareness of others and themselves, and contribute to forming healthier, more connected and resilient communities and societies.

All of this gives us hope for the future. Beyond directly showing up for others, these volunteers on the frontlines of mental health crises may be the key to addressing some of the most pressing social issues today. In fact, human-delivered online mental health interventions, such as text-based crisis response, may be one of the most effective

approaches to address the global mental health crisis through the sheer numbers of volunteers we can train. The training, in turn, impacts the lives of beneficiaries, volunteers themselves, their wider communities and even more broadly, society.

Introduction

Since 2013, our online crisis volunteers have used text messaging to support 14 million crises, for over 6 million people.



Mental health issues are rising around the world. Half of the global population will develop at least one mental health disorder by the age of 75.¹ Disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance use are most common, and typically first emerge in younger people. Over 700,000 people die by suicide every year, and it is the fourth leading cause of death among young people between 15 and 29.² Loneliness is a similarly pressing concern, particularly among the young, and it is closely linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes including suicidal ideation.³

And yet for many people, mental health support is out of reach, as mental health services are often fractured, and there is a general lack of human and physical resources to accommodate the need. Persistent stigmas attached to mental health challenges stand in the way of people actively seeking help. As a result, digital mental health service platforms and hotlines have been experiencing a vital and growing need.

The four nonprofits in this report – Crisis Text Line, Kids Help Phone, Shout, and spunout – provide a service that is available to people wherever they are, for free, 24/7. Since 2013, our crisis volunteers have used text messaging to support 14 million crises, for over 6 million people. The anonymity, confidentiality, and non-judgemental support offered through online mental health services has proven to be appealing, especially for younger people experiencing challenges such as loneliness, anxiety, bullying, self-harm, or suicidal ideation.⁴

To do this work, these four organizations have trained over 100,000 volunteers to listen compassionately, and help people in the worst moments of their lives navigate to a place of calm - providing one of the largest skills-based mental health volunteer training efforts in the world. Online crisis volunteers are trained to assess risk and de-escalate texters experiencing distress.

¹ McGrath, J.J., et al. 2023. Age of onset and cumulative risk of mental health disorders: a cross-national analysis of population surveys from 29 countries. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 10(9). [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(23\)00193-1/abstract](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(23)00193-1/abstract).

² World Health Organization. 2023. Suicide.

³ While loneliness affects people of all ages, up to 40 percent of adolescents experience loneliness and isolation. BBC Loneliness Experiment, 2018. [BBC Radio 4 - The Anatomy of Loneliness - Who feels lonely? The results of the world's largest loneliness study.](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-56842441)

⁴ Crisis Text Line. 2023. A Decade of Impact <https://www.crisistextline.org/a-decade-of-impact/>.

They engage warmly with texters, validate their experience, de-escalate their situation and support them to plan their next steps. Volunteers are supported on the platform at all times by mental health professionals to keep texters safe. Volunteers make every effort to de-escalate suicidal crises and plan for the texter's safety, but in a small number of cases, where de-escalation is not possible, supervising mental health professionals will connect with emergency services to initiate an intervention.⁵

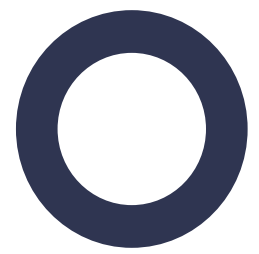
This unique approach enables trained volunteers to communicate with empathy and de-escalate crisis situations via text in real time, while being supported by professionals. It leverages technology while making use of real people to connect with texters on a deeper level. Based on anecdotal evidence, we have long suspected that our collective impact goes beyond directly supporting people in crisis, and that benefits extend to the volunteers and their communities.

In 2024, our four organizations across the world launched a study together to better understand the impact of this online volunteer experience. Together, the four partners surveyed recently active crisis volunteers to find out how this volunteering experience impacts them, and the people around them.

In the pages that follow, we focus on what we learned from the voices of over 3,100 active volunteers in this network as to how the largest digital mental health training program across the globe impacts the crisis volunteers themselves, their communities, and ultimately, wider society.



⁵ As of 2024, the percentage of emergency service interventions was under 1% of conversations.



Impact on Volunteers

Personal growth, connections to others, career opportunities

Volunteers' voices

"I feel like I know how to really listen to people and I know how I can possibly help, which is important. I don't want to be a bystander."

"I value my ability to help people in crisis to get them to reach a calmer state. These skills and experiences have helped me better understand mental health and to become an advocate for mental health."

"It is a privilege and an honour volunteering. It provides a real sense of purpose and pride, being able to help others through the platform. Furthermore, the texters are a major source of inspiration."

"Knowing that I have been there for someone at a desperate low point in their life and often been the only person to have praised them or recognised their struggle is rewarding and gives me as much as it gives them."

"Being able to actively see that I am helping someone through a hard time has been very rewarding to me and it is exactly what I wanted out of the experience."

"Being a volunteer is helping me to grow in ways I didn't think were possible."

"I am doing a Masters in counselling, and supporting texters has helped me develop my active listening skills."

Personal growth and development

The four partner organizations invest heavily in equipping volunteers with hard and soft skills necessary to engage with texters, recognize distress, and effectively de-escalate crisis situations. More specifically, text-based crisis volunteers are trained in active listening skills, as well as de-escalation techniques, cultural competency, and an appreciation for diverse experiences.

Almost all volunteers say that the skills and knowledge that they have gained through training and engagements with texters have had a significant impact on their personal development and growth. They feel more confident, more resilient, understand themselves better, and are able to deal with some of their own challenges more effectively. In general, skill-based crisis volunteering has contributed significantly to their own mental wellbeing.

Volunteer feedback

99%

Say volunteering has given them a **sense of purpose and accomplishment** and enhances their **active listening skills**

97%

Say volunteering has helped them **deal with some of their own problems** and **practice self-care**

96%

Say volunteering has helped them **develop personal resilience** and given them a **greater sense of wellbeing**

95%

Say volunteering gives them **more self-confidence**

Stronger connections with others and across generations

Volunteers' voices

"I really value the connection and understanding aspect. Oftentimes we can feel so isolated when having emotions and being able to feel them with someone else supporting you is really powerful."

"I feel like it has made me a more understanding person.
"This allows me to connect with people on a deeper level."

"I will forever be grateful for my time on the platform, and for the amazingly supportive community I have been lucky to be a part of."

"Making sure people aren't alone in their darkest moments is rewarding and feels like a great privilege."

People are more disconnected than ever before. Isolation and loneliness contribute to a range of mental health concerns.⁶ Online crisis volunteers not only provide a safe space for texters to be heard, they also establish stronger connections with others off of the platform because of that experience. The knowledge and skills gained by volunteers from all four partner organizations help them to have better relationships with family, friends, and work colleagues. Among young people, who, as shown earlier, are particularly affected by loneliness. We have also found this to be true. Three quarters of younger volunteers aged between 18 and 24 feel that volunteering improves their ability to meet new people and make friends, thereby directly tackling potential challenges with loneliness and isolation.

Volunteer feedback

92%

Feel more connected to other people because of this experience

86%

Feel that the **quality of their relationships with family or friends** was strengthened as a result of crisis volunteering

78%

Report **stronger work relationships** because of this volunteer experience – even more among volunteers aged 18-24 (81%)

70%

Say that their experience improves their ability to **meet new people and make friends**, and even more so among volunteers aged 18-24 (77%)

⁶ World Health Organization. 2022. World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All. <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356119/9789240049338-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

Educational and career pathways

Volunteers' voices

"I have been debating changing careers and entering the mental health field over the past 10 or so years. The training and experience so far have helped me decide to pursue this career change. Thank you!!"

"Helped me to solidify that helping others is a career choice that I want to make and I am now in school to become a mental health counselor."

"I am studying to become a therapist ... I love the work [volunteering with the service] and it was the reason I am changing careers to work with helping people."

"Having stopped work for many years to raise my children, to suddenly find such an interest in mental health through the online courses on the organization's learning platform is exciting for me and I'm now considering a proper course in Psychotherapy and Counselling."

"As a newly qualified counsellor the experience has given me confidence in my practice. I have recently got a new job as a phone counsellor on a helpline and I think having volunteering on my CV really helped."

The skill-based training that online crisis volunteers receive exposes people to real-life situations and, for many, this prepares and inspires them to change careers or supports them to access jobs or educational opportunities. In general, crisis volunteering plays a significant role in building capacity for the mental health sector, particularly for younger people. More than half of online crisis volunteers between 18 and 24 years have used volunteering to help them get a job or gain access to an education or training program, and nearly as many have been inspired to change careers because of the experience. This means that the four partner organizations are not only building mental health capacity through training volunteers, but are also consistently contributing to professional mental health capacity through their crisis volunteer program.

Younger digital crisis volunteers (age 18 to 24)

Volunteer feedback

54%

Say that the digital crisis volunteer experience has **helped them to get a job**

53%

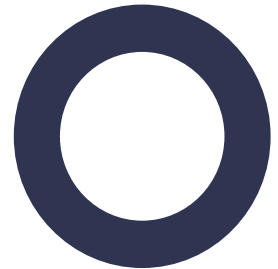
Say that volunteering **has helped them to get into an education or training program**

23%

Say that volunteering has **helped them to get promoted at work**

18%

Say that volunteering has **contributed to them getting a raise or salary increase**



Impact on Communities

Supporting people beyond the platform

Volunteers' voices

"I've shared countless resources with loved ones, friends, and friends of friends."

"I am part of the queer community and I have a lot of friends who struggle mentally. Unfortunately the Queer community has lost a lot of people to suicide, but I have been able to connect with a good amount of people and offer them safe passage through a lot of intrusive thoughts, because of this training and my passion for mental health."

"I think it's an incredible insight into how people cope and the supports that are available to them. I've recommended the role to a great number of people as I think the volunteers get so much out of it."

"It has taught me skills which have been very beneficial in my personal life helping a friend through a crisis."

Crisis volunteers extend their services beyond the formal platforms we create. As we've shown earlier, learning how to de-escalate mental health crises helps volunteers in their personal development and growth. They also actively use this knowledge and related skills to support family, friends, work colleagues, and community members off the platforms.

In fact, almost all volunteers across the four partner organizations have supported someone outside of the platforms, with many regularly applying the skills and knowledge they learned through crisis volunteering in their private or professional lives. This significantly extends the impact of the partner organizations, contributes to creating awareness of the availability of online mental health support, and breaks down lingering stigmas about mental health challenges and reaching out for help.

Volunteer feedback

98%

Of online crisis volunteers believe that volunteering provides them with the skills to help someone in need of mental health support beyond the platform

92%

Of these have helped someone in need of mental health support outside the platform at least once in the past six months – and 40% do so regularly

Volunteer feedback

Based on the frequency and ways crisis volunteers say they have been engaging with family, friends, at school and work, and in their communities, we conservatively estimate that for every crisis conversation supported on the platform, volunteers have helped someone in another moment of need outside of it. In other words, doubling the impact of each of these non profit organizations.

Together, we estimate that our volunteers have provided mental health and crisis support in at least 28 million moments of need across the communities we serve.⁷



⁷ Calculated using U.S. data from conservative assumptions of how volunteer responses of 'a few times per month, week, or day' might translate into annual instances. We found that in the United States, for every crisis supported on the platform, volunteers provided mental health support in another crisis outside of it. If we project these assumptions to the 14 million instances of mental health crises supported directly via text worldwide, this would bring us to an estimated 28 million instances including instances outside of the platform.

Impact on Broader Society

Spreading compassion, contributing to the mental health workforce, and influencing positive social change

Volunteers' voices

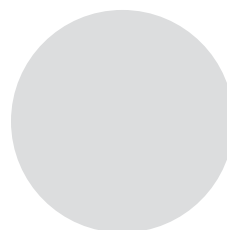
"It's allowed me to view those around me more compassionately. You never know what internal struggle someone is going through."

"I have learned to be more compassionate towards myself about my own struggles and be more observant towards people in my communities who may need someone there to listen to them."

"Being a volunteer has changed my life. It has given me a holistic new perspective on how to approach people in crisis and I have learned to be more compassionate towards others' experiences."

"It helps me to remain connected to an audience which I might not encounter otherwise and gain a greater perspective of current challenges people are grappling with."

Online crisis volunteers develop skills and knowledge that help them to be more considerate and compassionate human beings. Almost all volunteers across the four partner organizations have developed a greater sense of compassion for others as a result of this experience, and a deepened appreciation for diverse experiences and perspectives. Equally important is that almost all crisis volunteers, particularly younger volunteers, are keen to work in a field where they can help people, and many feel that their volunteer experience helped them get a job. Text-based mental health volunteer programs can therefore significantly contribute to the human resources capacity desperately needed in the mental health workforce.



Volunteer feedback

99%

Believe that crisis **volunteering helps them to influence positive change in other people's lives**

99%

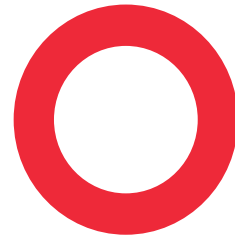
Agree that they have developed a greater sense of **compassion**, and their ability to **respond empathetically** to others has improved

98%

Have a **deepened appreciation** for diverse experiences and **perspectives** because of volunteering

87%

Due to their crisis volunteer experience, 87% **want to work in a field where they can help people** (96% for volunteers aged 18 to 24)



The Model That Makes It All Work

At its core, there are four factors that make this volunteer-powered digital mental health network and model work:



Partnerships

Digital crisis-response service providers depend on partnerships with governments, corporates, education and training providers, clinical experts, a range of staff members in different roles, and fellow nonprofit organizations such as the partners in this collaborative network to drive the success and optimize impact of the organization. An important partnership - and the focus of this report - is with volunteers. Initial investments in training volunteers with specific skills and knowledge to support texters in crisis show significant returns for texters, volunteers themselves, and their friends, family and communities.



Training

All volunteers in this network complete a rigorous online training course that focuses on developing empathetic communication skills, and identifying and de-escalating crisis situations with diverse populations. Continuous training opportunities help volunteers to better support specific cohorts of texters and sharpen their skills.



Live supervision

An important aspect of volunteer-powered digital mental health service provisioning is having mental health professionals supervise conversations in real time. This ensures live support to volunteers with trained professionals at the ready to step in and guide response when needed.

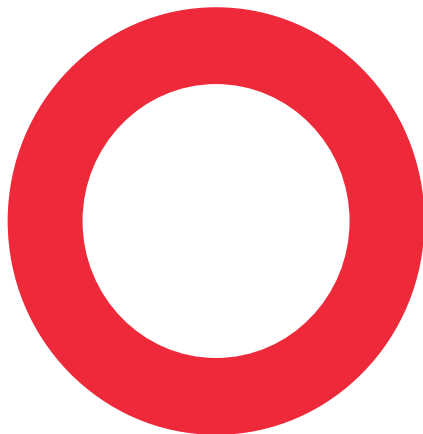




Technology

Modern technology platforms are foundational to online mental health services. This specific volunteer-powered model leverages sophisticated technology to optimize the speed and efficiency of human-delivered digital crisis response and mental health support. It does this through a common platform that enables online training, engagement with texters, storing and sharing resources, supporting volunteers, and securely managing data across contexts.

Through this platform, the four organizations leverage machine learning and AI to triage conversations, to simulate experiences for volunteer trainees, to understand data, and to make the user experience more efficient in each localized context while keeping human-to-human connection at the core.

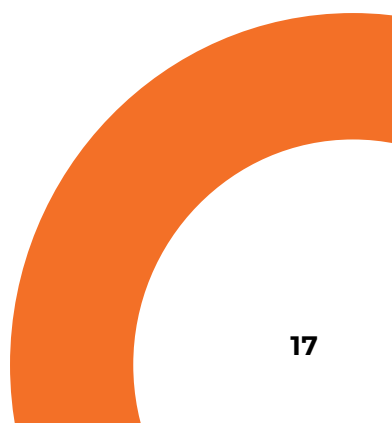
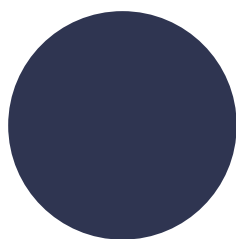


Conclusion

Crisis volunteering via text at Crisis Text Line, Kids Help Phone, Shout, or spunout is changing the lives of texters, volunteers, and communities beyond the platform. The text-based crisis response service offered by our organizations provides in-the-moment support to millions of texters through a shared online technology platform and volunteer model that is making a significant difference to meet the growing need for mental health support.

As this collaborative effort has shown, the reach and impact of this service extends far beyond supporting texters. The benefits of online crisis volunteering in the personal and professional lives of volunteers, as well as their friends, families, and communities, are clear. The significance of this cascading effect is that text-based crisis response and mental health services are substantially contributing to building capacity of the mental health workforce.

They are widening access to mental health services to those who are excluded from traditional access pathways. They are developing skills and resilience in tens of thousands of crisis volunteers who, in turn, provide crucial mental health support to others in their families, work, and communities, thereby contributing towards a more understanding and compassionate society as a whole.



If you wish to volunteer or donate, please contact:

CRISIS TEXT LINE |

Crisis Text Line is a nonprofit organization that provides free, 24/7, confidential text-based mental health support and crisis intervention in both English and Spanish for anyone in the United States and Puerto Rico. Since our launch in 2013, we have supported over 10 million conversations and helped more than 4.6 million texters in the United States.

www.crisistextline.org



Shout is the UK's only free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging service for anyone who is struggling to cope. We have taken more than 2.5 million conversations with people who are sad, worried, lonely or suicidal and who need urgent, in-the-moment support.

Shout is powered by Mental Health Innovations, a charity using digital innovation, data-driven analysis and the experience of clinical experts to improve the mental health of the UK.

media@giveusashout.org



The power of this work is in its collective impact. The partner organizations in this network are learning from each other, sharing knowledge and resources, and collaborating to broaden the impact their work makes. Together, we are leveraging the benefits of a shared model and sophisticated digital platform to tackle mental health crises at scale, producing data and information to share our learnings, and effectively delivering one of the largest mental health volunteer training programs in the world. Ultimately, we are making a significant capacity contribution to meet the growing global need.

To inquire about joining our partnership network and using our model and platform to deliver text-based mental health support in your context, email us at global@crisistextline.org.



Since 1989, Kids Help Phone (KHP) has been Canada's only free, 24/7, multilingual and confidential e-mental health service offering youth from coast to coast to coast support and a non-judgmental space for their feelings to go. In 2023, KHP achieved #1 most trusted charity in Canada. The organization is leading Feel Out Loud, the largest movement supporting youth and their mental health in the country's history. Over the past 35 years, over 10,000 people have volunteered their time at KHP. When "fine" isn't fine, nearly 2,500 active volunteer crisis responders at KHP unlock hope for more youth to thrive through text.

Discover more at KidsHelpPhone.ca.

spunout

text about it

Text About It by spunout is a free, anonymous, 24/7 messaging service providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support for our mental health and emotional wellbeing. If it matters to you, it matters to us.

Text About It provides a safe space where you're listened to by a trained volunteer.

Since the launch of Text About It in 2019 over 1,180 volunteers have taken more than 200,000 conversations with people who were in need of a listening ear, some of whom had nowhere else to turn.

The Text About It service is operated by spunout, Ireland's youth information and support platform, working towards an Ireland where all young people are supported and empowered to thrive.

hello@spunout.ie www.textaboutit.ie