

Crisis Call, Line One: Preparing and Training Staff for Crisis Callers

By [Scott J. Terres](#) | May 2016

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Not long ago it seemed that dealing with credit card or cable companies were the only times customers were likely to engage a call center. Currently, call centers are utilized to provide services to customers across a wide array of businesses. Not all will deal with crisis callers on a daily basis, but all can benefit by being prepared to deal with such callers if and when they present themselves. This article focuses specifically on call centers that are more likely to encounter crisis situations, but it will also provide good general information for those who encounter crisis callers less frequently.

Start with the Definition for Your Call Center: The first step of any call center is to define what they believe is a crisis caller. Centers focused exclusively on customer service may define crisis as a large customer calling with a complaint that threatens the contract or the incoming revenue. Centers focused on transit or shipping may define it as those dealing with late-arriving or lost items. However, a *crisis call center* tasked with handling medical or mental health services may define crisis in a completely different manner.

Crisis call centers attempt first to define both the crisis behavior and level of severity. Callers may have concerns about verbal, emotional, or physical abuse; chemical use or abuse; or thoughts of harm to themselves or others. Violence and threat of harm indicators may be passive (less extreme), active (actively planning or currently engaged), or pervasive (daily or ongoing regular planning or action). Chemical use and abuse is often present in conjunction with violence indicators but can also exist independently.

Determine the Needed Action: Once a crisis is defined, the center then must determine its role – based on the center’s respective industry – in assisting the caller. Those in customer service or transit centers may see their role as keeping the customer happy at all costs, where a crisis call center has the role of keeping the caller alive. With the role clearly

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identified, the actual workers need to be trained with these definitions and roles in mind and put into practice.

Staffing and hold times need to be considered for the different types of centers. Where a five to ten-minute hold in some industries may be considered acceptable, this is not so for crisis call centers. Staffing needs to be such so that an agent or multiple agents are potentially ready for calls as they arrive in real time. Abandoned calls may represent someone in an abusive relationship not getting the help they need or a suicidal caller hanging up on their last chance of hope.

Provide Appropriate Training: The professionalism and development of crisis call center employees is of paramount importance in a crisis call center. Staff should have the education and background to handle callers in a competent and effective manner. They need training in how to talk about crisis frankly and openly. A suicidal caller will not develop the needed level of trust with a worker that whispers the word *suicide* and is clearly uncomfortable or unskilled in talking about such a serious matter.

Additionally, workers in crisis call centers experience a higher rate of compassion fatigue than those in other centers, due to spending the majority of their days talking about horrific actions, plans, and thoughts. For this reason, they may need more than two fifteen-minute breaks during a workday.

These workers also need ongoing training and education to keep current with standard practices in handling crisis situations. For example, a crisis call center accredited through the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) requires all crisis center workers to obtain a minimum of four to six hours a year of continuing education.

Provide Needed Resources: A well-trained staff equipped with relevant resources can make a significant difference in the life of a crisis caller. Ideally, these resources should be available at a moment's notice, either via an electronic computer document or an up-to-date

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printed list accessible to the staff. The maintenance of resource information is crucial to long-term success, and directly linking the caller with the resources should be standard. Staff often terms this as a warm transfer, where the center agent can actually engage a resource with the caller still on the line, to ensure they are connected and needed help is received.

Crisis call centers also need to make safety planning a normal part of all crisis calls. Safety plans can vary widely depending on the need. A caller presenting as the victim of active domestic violence may need assistance in planning where to go, how to get there, whom to contact, how to gather money, what to tell the children, when to call law enforcement, and many other situations in an effort to provide the best chance for success. A suicidal caller may need similar assistance with safety plans, and AAS accredited centers will further attempt to verbally contract with the caller that they will not harm themselves until they are able to get help via provided resources or until they are able to obtain counseling or medical care.

Consider Confidentiality: When the goal is to keep the caller alive at all costs, companies need to be aware of their respective state laws about confidentiality, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and duty to warn as established by *Tarasoff vs. Regents of the University of California*. Briefly, a duty to warn may arise from products that are known to potentially cause injury to notifying a third party if a caller makes a specific threat of harm against an identified person, such as a threat of violence or homicide.

Crisis call centers accredited by AAS must be willing to break confidentiality and inform law enforcement when callers will not agree to a safety plan or provide a verbal no-harm contract. Typically the staff that answered the phone will continue to speak to the caller, while another staff member calls law enforcement to send help. Knowing about and informing law enforcement of any weapons or drugs in the possession of the caller is helpful information to pass along.

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Seeking Successful Outcomes: Call center workers rarely know what awaits them when the phone rings. The next call may be normal and customary, or there may be a client in severe crisis. Companies that have a solid definition of what they consider to be a crisis and a plan in place of how to handle those calls are going to achieve better outcomes, whether it be retaining a customer or saving a life.

A well-trained staff with appropriate resources has the ability to stabilize a crisis call, providing relief to both the caller and the answering agent. Safety planning and a clearly defined contingency plan round out the ways in which any call center can operate more effectively and efficiently, whether they are providing transit services or are an AAS-accredited crisis call center.

Scott J. Terres, MA, LPC-S, PhD, serves as vice president of Alliance Work Partners, a professional service of Workers Assistance Program. He has been with the company since 2004 and has been an intake counselor, a case manager, and the call center director prior to his current position. The company has provided employee assistance programs since 1977 and has one of the largest stand-alone, best-practice programs in the nation.

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