

# When Should You Call a Helpline?

Helplines can offer psychological support to deal with your problems, whether big or small.

## What is a helpline?

A helpline is a facility that offers non-judgmental listening services to people in crisis situations. This service is mostly offered through call-in on a phone line. While some helplines work 24/7, others have specific working hours. A caller who is in emotional distress can call the helpline and seek support.

## Why call a helpline?

Everyone has stresses and challenges in their lives that they may find hard to cope with. Sometimes, they are able to share these challenges with friends and family. Sometimes, they don't want to share them due to fears of being judged, or because they are worried that people around them will begin to look at them differently and define them by their problems. In some cases, you do not want to share extremely sensitive personal information with people who are closest to you. Sometimes, you may wish to share with someone but not be able to get in touch with them when you are in extreme distress. Other times, you may have no idea what to do and want to speak to someone you can use as a silent listener; just speaking about possible courses of action offers clarity. You could choose to call a helpline in any of these situations.

When you call a helpline, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Most helplines offer free services (you only pay a nominal amount for making the telephone call), and some are staffed by trained counsellors who can offer psychological support. Your information will be kept confidential. You have the freedom to speak about anything that is causing an emotional crisis, without the fear of being judged and with the assurance of confidentiality. The helpline counsellor may also assess your needs and point you to the closest local resources.

## Is a helpline only for crisis situations?

A helpline is not only for moments of crisis, nor is it only for people whose issues are life-threatening. You can call a helpline to seek information about any of your issues, or how to handle them. You can also call to seek information on behalf of another person if you think they have a mental health issue.

## Is phone the only way I can get help?

Some helplines are available only through phone calls, while others offer psychological support over email too. Yet others offer face-to-face counselling as well.

## What can I expect when I call a helpline?

When you call a helpline, you can expect

- to speak to a counsellor or volunteer who has had a minimum amount of training and counselling skills;
- that the counsellor is a non-judgmental, empathetic listener;
- to get clarity on your problem by speaking to the counsellor;
- a space to speak about any issues without being judged;

- information on how to seek further help for your issues;
- a reference to an expert who can help; and
- other practical support you may need (for instance, information on child help services in cases of child abuse).

## **What questions will I be asked when I call a helpline?**

When you call a helpline the counsellor will introduce themselves, ask you your name and mention how long the call can last. Each helpline has their own guidelines about how long the caller is allowed to speak before the line is disconnected. The counsellor may ask you for your age and location so that they can make the appropriate referrals if required. If you are uncomfortable sharing your name, they may ask you what you wish to be addressed as, so that you feel at ease during the conversation. They may also share with you the helpline's confidentiality policies.

## **What problems can I call a helpline for?**

There are several types of helplines, and your choice of helpline may decide on what support you are seeking. A majority of helplines offer listening services. Some offer specific information on how you can seek face-to-face professional support as well. There are helplines that offer support for specific issues: suicide, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, LGBT issues and so forth. These helplines seek to empower their callers by offering specific information and resources.

## **Can I call to seek help for a family member or friend?**

Yes, you can also call a helpline to speak about your concerns about another person's well-being or illness, and they will guide you to the appropriate resources. However, you cannot have another person counselled against their will. The motivation for counselling has to come from the person themselves for it to be effective. However, the helpline counsellor may be able to give you support on approaching the person concerned to discuss their problem, or deal with your own fears and anxieties about the issue.

## **If I call a helpline, who will I speak to?**

When you call a helpline, you can expect to speak to a counsellor who has some amount of training in offering psychosocial support. The qualifications of the person answering the call may depend on the helpline's own rules and regulations.

Some helplines are manned by volunteers, while some others have full-time staff. Regardless of whether they are volunteers, part-time or full-time employees, helpline counsellors are usually given some training in telephone counselling before they begin taking calls. Some helplines may be manned by people who have gone through some kind of distress themselves and would like to support others who are facing similar problems.

## **Will my information be shared?**

Helplines are usually confidential in nature. Most helplines do not share the caller's name, contact number or any other identifying details, unless the caller poses a threat to their own life or that of others around them. If you're calling a helpline and would like some reassurance about your data being kept anonymous, you could check with them at the beginning of your call and clarify what their policy is. Most helplines clearly state their policies on their websites as well, so you may wish to read up about them before you make the call.

## **I don't want to go in for face-to-face counselling – can I keep calling the**

## helpline?

No helpline can be a substitute for long-term counselling services. However, not everyone needs to consult a psychologist or a psychiatrist. The helpline counsellor may assess your needs to understand whether you need additional support. If that is the case, they will offer you information on mental health services that are relevant to your issues, or refer you to a mental health expert near your area.

## Can helpline counselling solve all my mental health problems?

Helpline counselling is not appropriate or adequate for all mental health problems. Some mental illnesses may need medication, therapy and rehabilitation. You may be referred to a psychiatrist who can treat you.

## What Not to Do When You Call a Helpline

If you're calling a helpline, it would be helpful to remember what a helpline does and what it doesn't. Here are some don'ts:

- **Don't assume that all your problems will be solved in a single phone call.** Some problems may be serious and require long-term help.
- **Don't give up responsibility of your problem.** Telling the counsellor your problems does not automatically make it their responsibility to fix it.
- **Don't ask for advice: 'What should I do?'** The purpose of counselling is to empower you to get clarity and find your own ways or skills to deal with your challenges, and not for the counsellors to offer their solutions to your problems.
- **Don't tell them what to do.** A helpline supervisor speaks of how parents call the helpline and ask the counsellor to tell their children to do what the parents want them to. This is not fair to the children, who may get further alienated from their parents as they see that the parents and counsellor are colluding against them.
- **Don't get abusive or misuse the facilities.** Avoid calling a helpline and using swearwords or relaying your sexual fantasies in detail.
- **Don't call 'just to chat'.** A helpline counsellor is a professional or volunteer who is offering their services, and not a friend. It is essential to maintain the formality of the relationship. Calling the helpline just to have a friendly conversation may hold up the line and prevent someone in a crisis from receiving timely support.

## How do I know which helpline is for me?

There's no single way to make sure that a helpline is the best or most effective one. It's important that you feel comfortable with their confidentiality policies, and that you feel safe sharing your story with them. After the call, you could do a quick review for yourself: Are your needs being met? Are you satisfied with the way the counsellor responded to your sharing, your concerns and questions? Has the call helped you feel better or gain some clarity or information? If the answer is *no*, you may want to reconsider your choice of helpline.

### About White Swan Foundation

White Swan Foundation for Mental Health is a not-for-profit organisation that offers knowledge services in the area of mental health. Based in Bangalore, India, they offer information relevant to India specifically, but also cover issues that apply to mental health issues globally. For more information, visit their website at <https://www.whiteswanfoundation.org>.

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