

Textual activity at Youthline (NZ)

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Abstract

At Youthline (NZ), the phones hardly ring anymore. Young people still have problems and are still helped, but the help mostly happens silently. This article addresses what happens when interactions with a crisis helpline service shift into the medium of text messaging. In asking what happens following the move to such spaces, it is hoped that a more fundamental question might then be addressed: Is this change for the good? In undertaking a qualitative study involving data analysis of some 6000 texted interactions received and sent by Youthline, and augmenting this data with interviews of those who had engaged with Youthline through text, this article argues that emotional support provided by text is neither good nor bad, but simply different.

Keywords: telephone counselling, telephone helpline, e-counselling, youth, adolescence

*Hi not relly sure bot this, my dad died and im not 2 sur bout thngs every1 seems 2 hav it 2getha. Im a reck—*Text message received at Youthline

Messages such as this are received by Youthline every day. That young people would choose such a “thin” medium in seeking help provides a significant challenge to those whose work has been predicated on talking. The “thinness” of the medium restricts what is said and heard. Text messaging, or SMS (short message service) as it is also called, constrains a message to a costed transaction of 160 characters. This constraint, plus the slowing down of thoughts necessitated by key punching, makes brevity the norm. In the process, nuances of voice are missing; absent are paralinguistic cues that might suggest age, gender, and urgency. The thinness of the medium prompts the following questions: Is it possible to meet with young people in the medium of their choosing? And, more than this, is it desirable?

An additional challenge is the association of technology with things viewed as cold and detached (Pols & Moser, 2009). Telephone counselling, however, has been demonstrated to be an effective medium for counselling young people (see, for example, Christogiorgosa et al., 2010), as has text-based counselling in the form of instant messaging (see, for example, King et al., 2006). There is, then, nothing inherent in the use of technology that should position counselling mediated by technology as the antithesis of warmth or presence, nor as a barrier to an effective therapeutic relationship.

That there is no evidence base for a text-based helpline produces tensions for reflective practitioners as well as for funding bodies, and is particularly important given Youthline's status as a Charitable Trust: no one wants to be involved with a service that is perceived as risky or potentially harmful. On the other hand, and as will be shown here, not providing a relationship in the medium of choice can also be risky. This study therefore has begun to address the evidence base gap, opening up a space inside which novel practice might be discussed.

Negotiating the research space

Youthline (NZ) has been providing a text-based helpline since 2004. While it was initiated to provide a portal to the organisation's phone work and face-to-face counselling services, its popularity is such that Youthline is now receiving more than 32,000 text messages a month (Youthline, 2013). The helpline and text service is staffed by volunteers whose training includes 120 hours of personal development and basic counselling skills. A further 35 hours is then spent in transition, involving a mentored relationship for all work undertaken on the helpline and texting service. When assessed as ready to work independently, these volunteers staff the helpline service. Their work is supported by fortnightly supervision sessions and further training forums on topics such as youth law, anger management, gender identity, building youth resilience, and cultural awareness.

Supporting young people in a different way remains challenging. Relating in a way that they value has required a shift in orientation toward spaces in which young people feel comfortable but in which those who are providing a service may not. The research reported on here tells of some of the adaptations required. This research reports on an analysis of 6000 text messages—digital traces sent and received by Youthline. In addition are the stories told of two young people who had used the texting service. The number of clients who volunteered to take part in the study was small despite the research being publicised in the *New Zealand Herald*, a national magazine for youth

(*RipItUp*), and on Youthline's website. In researching the use of the texting service, a non-intrusive approach was taken. Contacting those who had used the service was rejected because of Youthline's ethos of not initiating contact with clients except in cases of imminent crisis. The two young women who had made use of the service are obviously not a representative sample; their stories are placed alongside the data gathered from the digital traces, adding a richer understanding of the value some young people place on this texting experience.

Youthline has consented to being named in this article. In line with New Zealand Health Research Council guidance, ethical consent was not obtained for the data analysis involving de-identified records. For those interviewed, consent was obtained directly from participants. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee, and the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Background

Texting, at least in these times, and at least for young people in New Zealand, has become the most common way of reaching out to others when at a distance: 96% of young people own their own phones; of those with mobile phones, 85% text every day (Office of Film and Literature Classification and UMR Research, 2010). That young people might then apply texting to other interactions, where previously a phone call would have been made, might have been anticipated. However, that texting would lead to the near silencing of the helpline's service was something no one saw coming.

To appreciate the challenge faced by Youthline requires a step back in time to 2004. Youthline Auckland had been the recipient of a Christmas present, a personal digital assistant (PDA). This handheld device made the sending and receiving of text messages possible. The text service began as a stepping stone, or portal. Envisaged was a means through which young people might text in and be told of services available. However, texting rapidly grew and has become the substantive work of this helpline, with 385,000 texts being received annually compared with 48,000 helpline calls (Youthline, 2013).

When text messages are received by Youthline, an individualised response acknowledges the message as having been received and this response also includes reference to the content or feelings disclosed:

Hi there, sounds bit rough 4 u right now. Since there r things ur wanting 2 get clearer about, u culd call us free @ YL 0800211211 to tlk it through.—An example of a first text response sent by Youthline

While encouragement is provided for the person to call or make an appointment, young people have typically rejected this option. This seems to reflect the fact that, at least for young people, asking for help is difficult, and asking for help first via a text-based medium and then having to call back is perhaps doubly so. Those making use of the text medium did not tend to call back; cross-referencing to phone calls received demonstrated that those who texted used different phone numbers from those who called. Across 2005 and 2006, 20% of all text messages received were asking that the service be provided by text, and in many instances they were also providing reasons for not wanting to, or not being able to, take up other options. Figure 1 shows examples of such text messages.

Figure 1: Samples of text messages received by Youthline requesting a service by text.

<i>Can u plz jst txt me s0 i d0nt feel al0ne</i>
<i>I cnt ring u coz im stil on the bus</i>
<i>Im sori i dnt thnk i cn cal. i jst feel 2 stupid to talk</i>
<i>Kn i txt im a byt shy n da fne</i>
<i>Cn I jus txt cos I don wanna b heard I cnt talk wen I cry</i>
<i>If I wanted to effing talk I would have effing rung!</i>
<i>I rang b4 but got some1 unusually happy. Can we just txt?</i>
<i>I'm at boarding school. We aren't allowed to talk after lights out</i>
<i>Um i dnt lik to tlk on phnes cause ma dad will give me a hiding</i>
<i>Mobile phone calls don't work here</i>

When Youthline's texting service migrated from the PDA to computer screens for ease of reading and responding, the screen portrayal of text messages provided a persuasive message for the organisation. On every screen, the volunteers staffing the helpline were faced with multiple statements from young people saying they would rather text. The digital traces provided undeniable evidence of young people reaching out and wanting to be responded to in the medium of their choice.

In electing to provide a portal whereby young people might enter into counselling, what those on the helpline became increasingly aware of was that young people wanted to connect by text. Working from a client-centred and non-directive Rogerian tradition,

a stance of knowing what would best suit others was untenable. In not wanting to appear patronising in suggesting that the organisation knew better than the young people themselves regarding what was or wasn't possible, there was also awareness that what was or wasn't possible in moving into this medium was not known.

In not wanting to do harm, consideration was given to the constraints imposed by the small and silent screen space of SMS texting: too little information might be available and the situation might be misread. In not wanting to do harm, there was also a counterweight of risk to a population of young people who, on reaching out, might not be helped otherwise. Not knowing how to provide a service by text risked not providing a service at all to some people.

This dilemma is demonstrated in the story shared by a young person who had attempted to use the text helpline. Jasmine (a pseudonym) had left home late at night after a fight with her mother over her boyfriend. Her story involved being in a remote part of New Zealand where there was no street lighting, the houses were few and far between, and it was a region in which the cellular network could best be described as patchy. In this environment a text message could often get through when a phone call could not. In being referred back to calling the free helpline, Jasmine described having to defend herself and her preference. In reaching out for help, she said, "I felt I had done something wrong." In being told to call, her own wisdom was denied. This was the story of a 12-year-old girl who on reaching out and contacting the service had felt worse for the experience. While there are risks in responding to small amounts of information, greater risk was identified in the service not being accessible at least to some unless the text service was expanded.

The work of this organisation is therefore shown as growing from a positive intention of doing less harm and more good. While these aspirations might be contested in terms of how they are applied, the motivation is not. Good intentions, though, are not enough. The question of whether skills associated with emotional support, guidance, and counselling might translate into a texted (SMS) form is therefore explored here. This is undertaken by addressing the concerns of a working alliance (Wampold, 2010) and returning to the seminal work of Rogers (1957) regarding the necessary and sufficient conditions of the therapeutic relationship.

Translations of a text medium

The working alliance

While there are many approaches to being therapeutic, the working alliance is the one considered to be the major determinant of what is effective (Wampold, 2010). This

working alliance, as discussed by Hanley (2009), involves a collaborative space entered into with the hope of creating change. Just how this alliance is developed involves more than the emotional climate of such a space; it also involves the form in which such encounters occur. That an effective working alliance can be technologically mediated has been shown in telephone counselling (Reece, Conoley, & Brossart, 2002) and within online counselling spaces (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Reynolds, Stiles, & Grohol, 2006). With regard to working with young people specifically, and within a textually mediated online chat space, the factors they most commonly identified as being particularly important included privacy and the sense of feeling that they were in an emotionally safe space (King et al., 2006). Hanley (2009) suggests that concerns for privacy and safety are associated with the power dynamics of the relationship. It is likely that young people find text messaging an attractive option when seeking emotional support for several reasons: they have ownership of the medium through which the working alliance is established; their anonymity might be enhanced by the fact that they are neither visible nor audible; and the medium of texting provides a reflective space in which they can consider and reconsider what they write.

The therapeutic relationship: Necessary and sufficient conditions

The skills base of this organisation developed out of a Rogerian client-centred tradition. Inside of a Rogerian approach, the necessary and sufficient conditions of the therapeutic relationship are empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (Rogers, 1957). While there has been considerable debate over time as to whether or not these core conditions are “necessary and sufficient,” there is nonetheless general agreement that they are at least highly desirable (Kirschenbaum & Jourdan, 2005).

Empathy: The presence of empathy has historically been mapped in the transcripts of Rogers’ own case notes. Of interest to this investigation was the brevity of his responses in many examples, with the talking space being primarily occupied by the client. Mallen, Vogel, and Rochlen (2005) noted that research into the experiences of empathy online is minimal; for SMS text-based counselling, the research evidence is non-existent. With regard to the digital traces of Youthline’s conversations with young people, a four-point empathy table (see over) was used to identify whether empathy could be identified as having been present.

Empathy was seen to be present in almost all of the texted conversations between Youthline and those who initiated contact. In acknowledging feelings, empathy can be seen as being present at least at a beginning level. In the following story from Megalyn

Table 1. Four-point empathy scale (Mearns, Thorne, & McLeod, 2013).

Level 0: This is a response that shows no evidence of understanding of the client's expressed feelings, or perhaps a judgemental response, advice giving, hurtful, or rejecting.

Level 1: This response shows a partial understanding of those feelings and responses that are very much on the surface for the client. Sometimes this level of empathy is called subtractive in the sense that the listener has lost something of the client's experience in the response she has given.

Level 2: In this response the listener is showing an understanding of the feelings and thoughts that the client has been expressing. This level is sometimes called accurate empathy.

Level 3: This response shows a level of understanding of the client beyond the level of the client's present expression. As well as communicating comprehension of the surface feelings and responses of the client, the listener is showing an understanding that there are also underlying feelings. This is sometimes called additive empathy because it is adding something to the client's present expression, but is more commonly referred to as a depth reflection.

(a pseudonym), empathy is not only seen to be present but was present to a deeper level than might have been appreciated by a text-based analysis.

I texted Youthline months ago. And I didn't delete them; I looked at them even the next day. They're still there. I wanted to keep them; getting them felt extremely good. There were about six messages back and forth. Even though my old phone broke, I know they are still on my SIM card so they're still there... The best message I still remember getting, it wasn't a suggestion, though it was good to get some of those too. That's why I haven't cleared them off; they might be useful again.

But one text message really triggered me. I started bawling my eyes out as each feeling welled up. I felt understood.

The best message was connected to how I felt; you feel the support coming is concrete; it wasn't a suggestion, it was affirming of me.

Reviewing this transcript, accurate empathy (level 2) is clearly evident. Megalyn comments on having felt understood. In addition she describes feeling supported to the extent that further feelings were given expression. This could be read as additive empathy (level 3). Of further interest is that she felt so affirmed that she kept the messages received as a talisman to what had felt good.

While texting is sometimes positioned as providing an avoidance of things emotional (see, for example, Turkle, 2011), the experience at Youthline is that it may also provide a space where things emotional might be expressed safely. It seems paradoxical, but as the following example shows, texting may actually increase the information shared because the conversation is held in a space that mitigates embarrassment.

Client: *Hi not relly sure bot this, my dad died and im not 2 sur bout thngs every1 seems 2 hav it 2getha. Im a reck*

Youthline: *snds like ur gng thru a tuff time at the momnt. Sorry 2 hear tht ur feeln tht evry1 else seems 2 b copin, xcpt fr u*

Client: *Seems tht way,they al hav it 2getha and i js cant stop crying. Snds stupid I kno*

Youthline: *Its ok 2 cry n be sad abt losin ur dad. Ppl r all differnt wif ways they react*

Client: *I dnt knw. Mayb I jst bein silli I dnt even knw why I txt ths, u cnt chnge anythn*

Youthline: *We cnt change it, but we can offr supprt n b here to txt n tlk 2.*

Client: *Crazy he was sick 4 2yrs, u wld thnk Id get used 2 the idea I knew it was gonna hapn*

Youthline: *Knowin tht it wld happn an actually facn it can be very different. It's a big chnge nt havn him ther anymore*

Client: *I cnt bleve hes realy gne. I feel realy weird with him not here*

Youthline: *Cn undastand that u feel tht way. hav u been able 2 tlk wif any1 bt how ur feeln*

Client: *Nah talkn out loud makes it real n I jus wan it to go slo*

In this text interaction there is clearly an intent to discuss what is emotionally laden. The person texting Youthline has identified that expressing these feelings around others does not feel safe. In the responses from Youthline there is acknowledgement that what the client feels is valid and accepted; a safe environment is being provided.

In providing empathy inside a texted interaction, the client's own pace for what they are adjusting to is respected. Mapping the levels of empathy against the digital trace suggests that accurate empathy is being conveyed.

Unconditional positive regard: Having an unconditional positive regard is to provide a space in which a person might disclose without feeling judged. In the example above there is acceptance of the expression of emotions without judgement. The interaction provided containment for the expression of feelings that might otherwise be experienced as overwhelming. Given that the organisation follows a non-directive tradition, space is provided for a person to explore possibilities and not be directed as to what they should or shouldn't do. There is acceptance that the client has the right to control the pace at which they are coming to terms with grief, and who they might talk to, as well as the ways in which they might choose to talk.

Being non-judgemental in light of frequent pessimistic portrayals of texting is a challenge. Media representations have presented a predominantly negative view of texting as various concerns about its use have arisen. In addition to being associated with scholastic failure and cheating (*Exams ban for mobile phone users*, 2005), texting has been associated with social and emotional developmental delay (Turkle, 2011) as well as relational dysfunction (Hart, 2010). Specific concerns about content associate texting with bullying and sexting (the sending of sexually explicit material by text) (see, for example, St George, 2009). In addition, texting has been associated with personal injury (see, for example, Malick, 2007) as well as public risk (see, for example, "Drivers who text at wheel are '23 times more likely to crash'," 2009; Rowlands & Kavanagh, 2009). There are also reports implicating texting with psychological addictions through to zombiism (*Take anything But not my mobile phone*, 2009). It is worth noting that a similar level of concern was identified by Marvin (1988) in regard to the advent of the telephone.

Congruence: Congruence is associated with authenticity and genuineness (Rogers, 1957). Substantively different from most supportive relationships, texted conversations with Youthline may occur over several hours through to days, weeks or even months. A texted conversation that spans significant lengths of time is therefore likely to engage several people responding on behalf of Youthline. This provides a very different type of relationship from the kind that is more commonly anticipated in seeking emotional support, guidance, or counselling. In the digital traces examined, very few of those texting in ever asked how this was addressed.

In the following response from Youthline, a nested conversation provided a provocation for sensitive confrontation sustaining genuineness and congruence:

Youthline: *I'm a bit confused earlier on you said "she" has cancer but now you are saying "I"*

The reply indicated that the phone had been passed to the friend who was now texting. Sharing a phone provided an easing into a conversation of support. However, the "thinness" of a texted conversation, stripped of verbal or visual cues, needs to be considered with sensitivity. In the absence of cues it is very easy to read too much or too little from a texted statement, but as shown by this example, an absence of information is managed by asking.

While there are obvious limitations when a single message is constrained by the need for brevity, what becomes apparent is that texting is not confined to any one utterance, but can instead be a conversation that develops and a therapeutic relationship that evolves involving multiple counsellors responding.

Texting is neither good nor bad, but different

The examples above demonstrate that counselling skills may be mediated within a texting space. It is therefore possible that texting could support a working alliance and the conditions deemed to be highly desirable, if not necessary and sufficient, for the provision of a therapeutic relationship.

What the future holds

Rather than focusing on whether text is good, bad, or even ugly as a way of providing emotional support, guidance, and counselling, I have suggested that it is timely to discuss how its differences might add to or detract from a working alliance and the therapeutic relationship. Centre-staging the *relationship* as critical rather than the *medium* provides the potential to move forward.

Positioning the relationship as central is not new to offering emotional support, guidance, and counselling; nonetheless, there is purpose in re-establishing its importance. During the time I was exploring the use of text messaging at Youthline, a media broadcast positioned text counselling as having killed (NewstalkZB, 2010).¹ That texting for emotional support, guidance, and counselling could be done poorly is not disputed here. The possibility that this article might be used to validate practice that is poor has generated much soul-searching on my part. Like Weizenbaum's relationship with ELIZA (Weizenbaum, 1966, 1976), or the classic story of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and his relationship with Creature (Shelley, 2008; originally published 1818), intentions and actualities may differ. My response is that counselling

practices can neither be “made for good” nor made in the abstract. In relating this to novel practices in the provision of emotional support, consideration is therefore directed toward taking care, rather than taking control.

Getting accustomed to “now” does not hold well in uncertain futures. Already Youthline is experiencing much longer text messages, in part because of a reduction in “text speak.” The types of phones now prevalent no longer limit a message to being read in such a small space, and no longer rely on multiple key presses on a numeric keypad that was never intended for holding conversations. In addition, most mobile phones no longer indicate when a particular utterance has gone beyond the 160 characters of a single-costed SMS message. This, in conjunction with increasingly lower costs of text messaging, means the imperative to be brief is reduced. However, further alterations as internet-capable “smart phones” become more common, alongside dramatic changes in funding plans, are likely to make internet connectivity much cheaper. Such changes and, increasingly, more freely available spaces in which wi-fi connectivity is enabled, are again likely to alter preferred ways of relating.

Conclusion

How we interact is altered when texting; *that* we interact is not. The constraints of space may limit a single response, but it is important to see that such responding occurs inside relationships. It is not possible to answer whether texting for emotional support, guidance, and counselling is good or bad in the abstract. This article therefore argues that text counselling is neither good nor bad, but different.

The working alliance negotiated through a texting medium is different from what might have been developed otherwise. At the same time, there is appreciation for how such a relationship may not otherwise have been possible. While texting is frequently positioned in ways that would see it marginalised by its association with negativity, there is scope for appreciating that therapeutic conversations might be possible via this medium that would not otherwise occur. The provocation to reconsider purpose has been useful for Youthline (NZ). While its staff are now world leaders in the provision of a text messaging helpline, they are no more attached to text messaging than they are to landlines or to computers. Their attachment is to working with young people, as it has always been.

This study set out to demonstrate how Youthline negotiated the medium of text messaging and how skills associated with the provision of emotional support, guidance, and counselling might translate to the very small screen space of text messaging.

Although this has been demonstrated, the intention is not to convert others to working within technologically mediated means. While the findings demonstrate that it is possible to establish a working relationship and that skills associated with a therapeutic relationship may translate within this medium, a stronger message is in being attentive to the “voice” of young people and what this means for working in a relationship.

Endnotes

1. Neither the young person who died, nor the counsellor involved, was associated with Youthline. In the 28-page report (opinion 09HDC01409) (Health and Disability Commissioner Te Touihau Hauroa Hautanga, 2010) three sentences relate to a text conversation occurring with a counsellor. The remainder of the report identified many factors in what was, overall, poorly managed health care.

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