

Crisis line volunteers here to listen when life hurts



Lynette has heard it all – people calling because they feel suicidal, depressed, afraid to leave an abusive spouse and sometimes simply overwhelmed. The calls can be heartbreaking but knowing that she can help make a difference in the life of someone in crisis is the reason why Lynette continues to volunteer as a Distress Line Listener for The Support Network.

“It’s a nice feeling knowing that you’ve helped someone in that moment,” says Lynette. “This is my way of giving back to the community and being a role model to our children.”

The Distress Line is a program of The Support Network and has been answering calls from individuals in crisis for more than 30 years. The line is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year and callers are assured complete confidentiality and anonymity.

The line isn’t only for those experiencing crisis, but for third party individuals who are helping someone they care about through a crisis. Anyone who needs a lis-

tening ear is welcome to make use of this unique service.

But the Distress Line is in distress. A shortage of volunteers is making it difficult for the staff managing the program and the volunteers answering the phones.

“We wouldn’t exist without volunteers,” says helpline supervisor Jenny Jones. A shortage of volunteers could lead to thousands of calls going unanswered every year – a startling fact when you consider that 31 per cent of Distress Line calls are suicide-related.

While a background in psychology, social work or counselling isn’t needed, Jones notes that volunteers should be non-judgmental, empathetic and mature. These are qualities that ensure the right people are answering the phones, she explains.

Volunteers are provided with 64 hours of training that takes place over a span of six to eight weeks. Through a combination of classroom learning and hands-on “role plays,” volunteers learn about issues like family violence, suicide, self-harm and more.

“The training is intense, but the benefits and knowledge volunteers walk away with is so valuable,” says Sook-Yin Burwash, volunteer program co-ordina-

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THE SUPPORT NETWORK DISTRESS LINE LISTENER

tor for The Support Network. Because the Distress Line is Edmonton’s only accredited crisis phone services, volunteers are assured the highest level of quality for training standards. “The skills learned in training are transferable to other areas of your life, whether it’s work, family or your relationships. You strengthen your communication skills and learn to be more compassionate. You also develop a deeper understanding of community issues.”

Lynette praises the program’s excellent training and instructors for providing her with the knowledge needed to answer the calls.

“I’m grateful for the amazing instructors and for all the things that I’ve learned,” she remarks, adding that the environment at The Support Network is one of the many reasons why she contin-

ues to volunteer. “In the hustle-bustle of some days, coming here can be a break, as crazy as that sounds,” Lynette laughs. “It’s because of the people that work here. It’s nice and comfortable, and the support we have as volunteers is huge. You have resource leaders available any time to help you out. You can call them at three in the morning and they’ll be there to help you.”

Upcoming training classes for the Distress Line will take place in January. To become a volunteer for the Distress Line, visit www.thesupportnetwork.com or call (780) 482-0198. For more information about volunteerism and how to find opportunities in the community, visit www.volunteeredmonton.com.

Look to this space to see the work that the city’s volunteers and nonprofit organizations are carrying out and what it is that Volunteer Edmonton is involved in. For more information or suggestions for story ideas please contact Evelyn Pham, communications co-ordinator, at epham@volunteeredmonton.com, call 732-6655 or check out our website at www.volunteeredmonton.com. Volunteer Edmonton is a program of The Support Network.



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