

Live Chat Counselling Pilot
Final Report

November 2012



Kids Help Phone

BEING THERE FOR KIDS

Acknowledgements

Kids Help Phone's new *Live Chat* counselling service is the result of many people's hard work. Chaired by Sharon Wood, President & CEO, the Steering Committee included Todd Solomon and Alain Johnson, Clinical Directors; Ted Kaiser, VP, Information Technology; Alisa Simon, VP, Counselling Services & Programs; Susan Morris, VP, Finance & Administration, and; David Gray, VP, Marketing, Communications & Strategic Development. This major initiative was project managed by Natasha Pechmann, Director of e-Services.

Janice Kelly, Research Writer; Tina Wilson, Research & Evaluation Analyst; Mark Duiker, Web Designer; Deborah Jussome, Communications Coordinator; Dr. Janice Currie, past VP, Counselling Services; Lila Knighton, past Director, Knowledge Mobilization, and; Alexandra Kimball, past Children's Editor, also contributed to the development of this new counselling medium.

The core group of counsellors and counselling managers who launched the new service included Cheryl-Lynn Roberts, Dominique Poirier, Véronique Houde, Jean-Philippe Thibault, Laurence Barbe, Régine Paul, Alexandre Lavoie, Ingrid Savey, Gayle Brown, Beatrice Leja, Shannon Freud, Melanie Zuzarte, Michelle Goldstein, Sandy Robbins, Sonia Pahwa, Lee-Anne Crawford, Caden Craig, Andréanne Deschamps, Valérie Lafrance and Katia Beltrami.

Counselling Services process data included in this report were provided by Natasha Pechmann, Caden Craig and Todd Solomon. Data analysis was conducted by Tina Wilson and Dilys Haner.

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Introduction

Kids Help Phone began providing telephone-based individual counselling in 1989 and added the kidshelpphone.ca website in 1996. Between 2000 and 2006 we provided support to parents through a parallel helpline. In 2002, we began providing Internet-based message board counselling. In March of 2010 we re-launched the website as four distinctive sites (kid and teen sites, in both French and English). While Kids Help Phone had considered adding a new counselling service platform for a number of years, in 2010 we began to research our options in earnest. Email, texting, chat rooms and even social networking sites were considered before we decided on instant messaging/chat. The following elements were used to weigh each possible option:

- **What young people want:** A 2010 survey of Kids Help Phone website clients found 71% wanted Kids Help Phone to provide some form of chat counselling.
- **Current and emerging practices in the international helpline community:** Other comparable helplines are increasingly offering counselling through a chat medium.
- **Expected clinical utility:** The extent to which the chosen service medium would add something different to our existing offerings, and provide a platform through which quality counselling is possible.
- **Anonymity & confidentiality of the service platform:** Social media and chat rooms present particular challenges to the Kids Help Phone promise of anonymity and confidentiality.
- **Logistics of service delivery:** Expected wait times and hours of service were important considerations.

In May of 2010 Kids Help Phone's Board of Directors approved moving forward, citing four key principles for developing our *Live Chat* service:¹

Guiding Principles

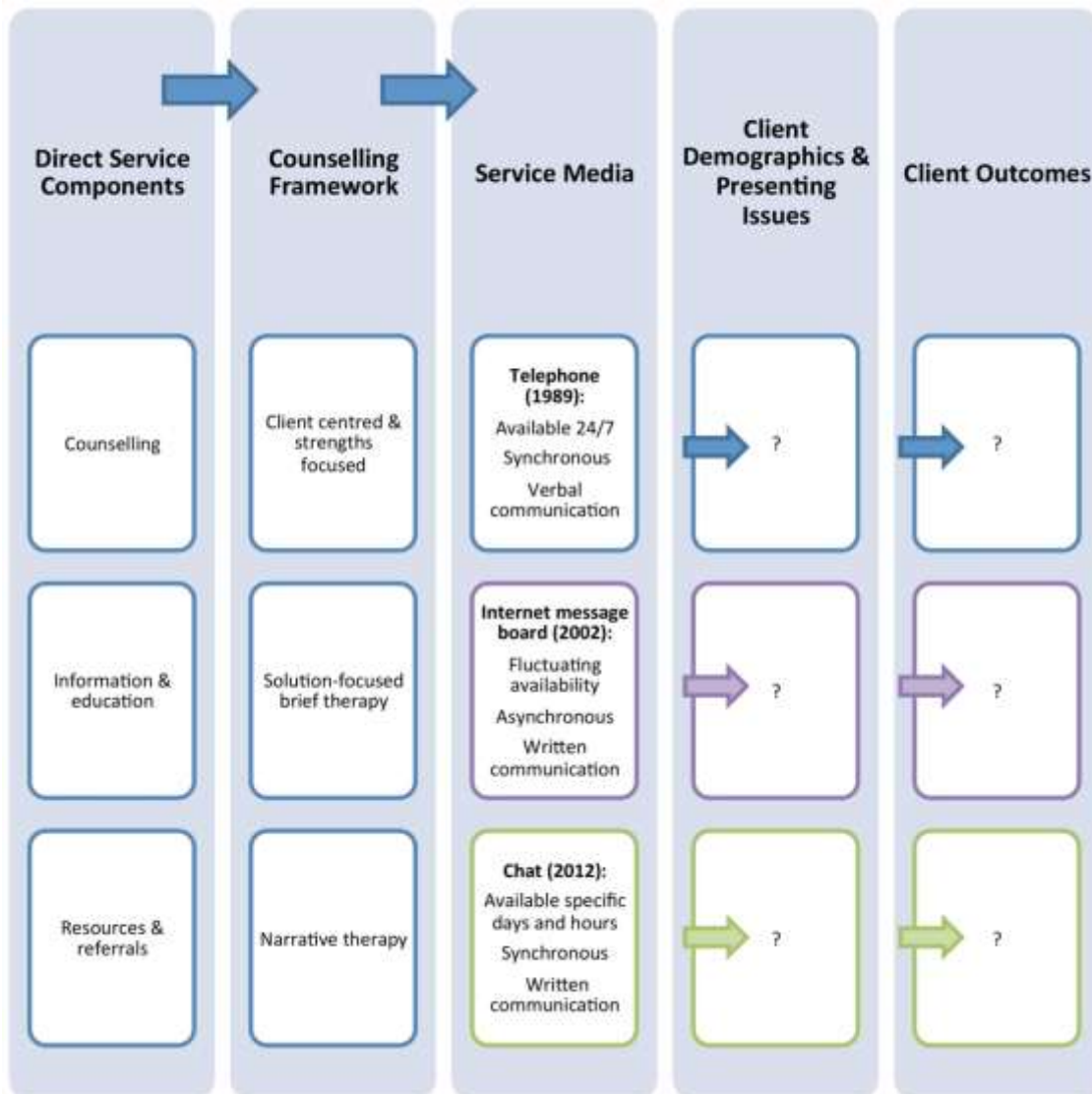
- The new service must **align with the organization's guiding principles** (anonymity and confidentiality, individualized support, counselling responses should be as immediate as possible, free of cost).
- It must have **high therapeutic value**.
- It must address **young people's preferred means of communication**.
- A **pilot must be completed** before full launch.

The chat counselling interface was developed and integrated with our existing technical infrastructure over 2011. The *Live Chat* counselling pilot ran from January to the end of July 2012.

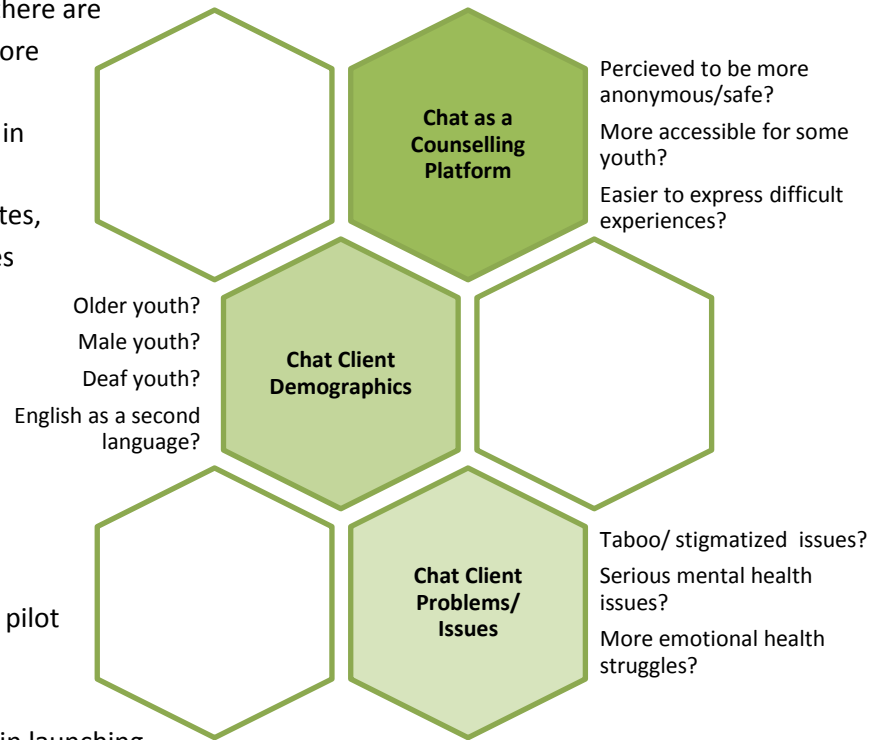
¹ Currie & Kelly, 2012 (internal report).

Live Chat in Context with Phone- and Web-based Counselling

Counselling, information and education, and resources and referrals are the core direct service components provided by Kids Help Phone’s professional counsellors. This service is offered through different platforms or media (telephone, Internet message board, and now chat) in both official languages (English and French). Each service carries somewhat different possibilities and constraints (e.g., emotional nuance will be more or less apparent depending on the medium). Young people can also be expected to respond to each service in somewhat different ways (e.g., perception of the medium’s anonymity, or having a preference for verbal communication over typing). The new *Live Chat* counselling medium complements our existing media in that it blends the synchronous communication (immediate back-and-forth) of our telephone medium with the written communication of our Internet message board medium. *Live Chat* further bridges differences between our two longer-running services as it is accessible by *both* mobile phone and computer. Beyond these differences, how might we expect our new *Live Chat* counselling medium to complement to our existing service offerings?



While there are few peer reviewed studies that address chat counselling, the existing literature suggests **chat clients are older** than those who access telephone support (age 14 versus age 12) (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009). Chat conversations are more likely to be about **emotional concerns** like loneliness, self-harm and depression, and the issues brought to the chat service medium tend to be **“more severe and more structural in nature”** than those discussed on the telephone (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009). In comparison to the telephone service, there are **fewer requests for information** and more focus on getting emotional support (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009). Further, in comparison to telephone counselling conversations which last about 8 minutes, chat sessions average about 30 minutes (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009). Finally, online counselling **may be more accessible** to young people than other support mediums (King et al., 2006).



Evaluation Purpose

The evaluation of our *Live Chat* pilot included both process and outcome components: the experiences of our Counselling Centre in launching and learning how to work through this new medium, client demographic and issue data, assessing client expectations of the new service, and measuring what changes for our clients by the end of their counselling session. We evaluated against three expected outcomes: Reduced distress, increased clarity about what to do next, and increased confidence.

Live Chat Service Volumes

The seven month *Live Chat* pilot ran from January 1st until the end of July, 2012. The service was open between the hours of 6pm and 11pm, Thursday to Monday nights. During our seven month pilot, counsellors handled (received) 144,255 contacts.² As we can see in the following pie chart, 91% of these were phone contacts, followed by web at 5% and chat at 4%. During this same time period, our call centre routing technology registered 7,463 chat requests.³ Of these, 1,063 abandoned while waiting for service and a further 1,058 were removed from their position in queue at

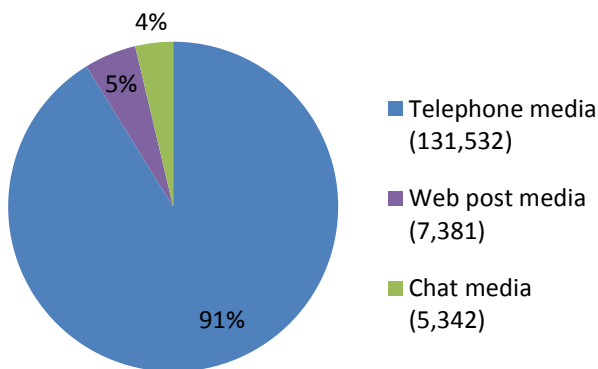
² CI Data: Queued Contact Time Report & Flexiforum data: Posts received.

³ CI data: Queue Contact Time Report.

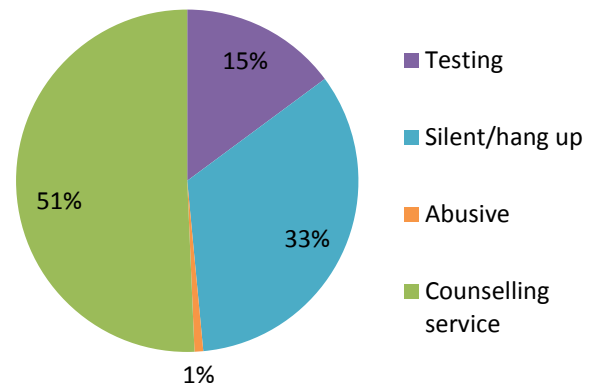
the end of service hours without having received counselling. Counsellors received (handled) 5,342 chats.⁴

Of the 5,246 chats handled by counsellors (this number is slightly smaller than the one just reported because it comes from a different report),⁵ 33% (1,764) were silent/hang-ups with no chatter answering the opening greetings. A further 15% (779) were testing chats. 43 chats were reported as abusive. At 51% of all handled chats, counsellors provided 2,657 sessions of chat counselling over the seven month pilot period. 686 or 26% of these counselling sessions were provided in French (the proportion of French language service for our other two direct counselling services is approximately 10%).

**7 Month Live Chat Pilot:
Handled contacts
(n= 144,255)**



**7 Month Live Chat Pilot:
Proportion of types of contacts for chat
(n= 5,246)**



On average, 380 chat counselling sessions were provided each month, 88 chat counselling sessions per week, or 18 chat sessions per day.⁶ Over the seven months of the pilot, the average wait time for *Live Chat* service was 42 minutes. The longest wait time was just under 3 hours.⁷ Using a proxy calculation, Counselling Services estimates that the average chat session lasts 50 minutes.

⁴ CI data: Queue Contact Time Report.

⁵ CI data: Line of Business by Queue Report.

⁶ 2,657 divided by 7; 380 divided by 4.3; 88 divided by 5.

⁷ CI data: Queue Contact Time Report. Wait times are for handled chats.

Methodology

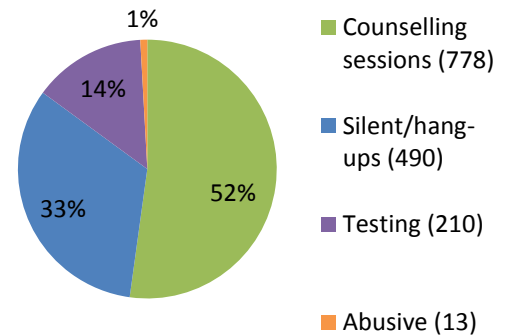
Our client satisfaction and outcome evaluation data was collected through a pre- post-test research design. Chat clients were presented with a series of questions before chatting with a counsellor (our pre-test). Closing the chat window at the end of the chat session would then trigger the voluntary post-chat survey pop-up window to appear (our post-test). Counsellors also attached the survey invitation link in the text of their final chat counselling reply. This pre-post survey data was exported into Excel, and once cleaned, loaded into SPSS (a quantitative data analysis program) for analysis.

The pre-post chat questionnaire was developed over the spring and summer of 2011. Facilitated by our Knowledge Mobilization department, the questionnaire was drafted based on input from Counselling Services, Fund Development, and the Chat Steering Committee. An environmental scan of international child helpline evaluation practices also informed the development of this data collection tool. A later draft was reviewed by a University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash School of Social Work faculty member with expertise in evaluating impact in child welfare settings. This survey tool was also reviewed by young people in multiple formal and informal usability tests. Our final survey contained nine pre-chat questions and 15 post-chat questions for a total of 24 items. The first four basic information questions were mandatory (gender, age, province and community type) and the remaining 20 were optional. Please see appendix A for the pilot evaluation client survey.

Sample

Pre-post data reported on here is from June 7th to July 31st. Over this final two months of our pilot, counsellors provided 778 sessions of chat counselling (206 or 26% of these counselling sessions were provided to French language chatters). Of these, 347 answered the pre-post chat survey (including 70 French language respondents for 20% of our sample). The sample discussed here therefore represents 45% of all chat counselling provided over June and July.⁸

Chats handled by counsellors, June & July (n= 1,535)



Limitations

While a pre-post intervention research design is quite strong, the voluntary nature of our study means we cannot know if particular sub-populations of youth are over or under represented (e.g., those with very strong opinions may be more likely to provide feedback). Further, as self-report data, our findings are vulnerable to both positive and negative response bias (e.g., respondents may feel pressure to respond in particular ways).

⁸ 347 sample, divided by the 778 sessions of chat service provided over June and July.

Evaluation Results

Findings from our 24 item pre-post chat questionnaire are organized into client demographics, their connection to other supports, their relationship to Kids Help Phone, indicators for overall client satisfaction, and last, the matched pre-post chat scaling questions that allow us to measure what changed for our respondents from the beginning to the end of their *Live Chat* counselling session. Narrative responses from our “other” answer options and from our open-ended question “*Is there anything else you would like us to know?*” are used throughout to illustrate these findings.

With an overall sample of 347, please note the “*n*=” number for each question as this indicates the number of respondents who answered that particular question. Most charts include both the percent and the number of responses.

Respondent Profile

Province (*n*= 347): Similar to our telephone and post services,⁹ at 50% or 175 respondents, clients from Ontario are the largest majority of our *Live Chat* support service. This was followed by clients from Quebec at 22% or 76 respondents. 31 or 9% of our respondents were from Alberta, and 22 or 6% were from British Columbia. Please see appendix B for the full provincial distribution.

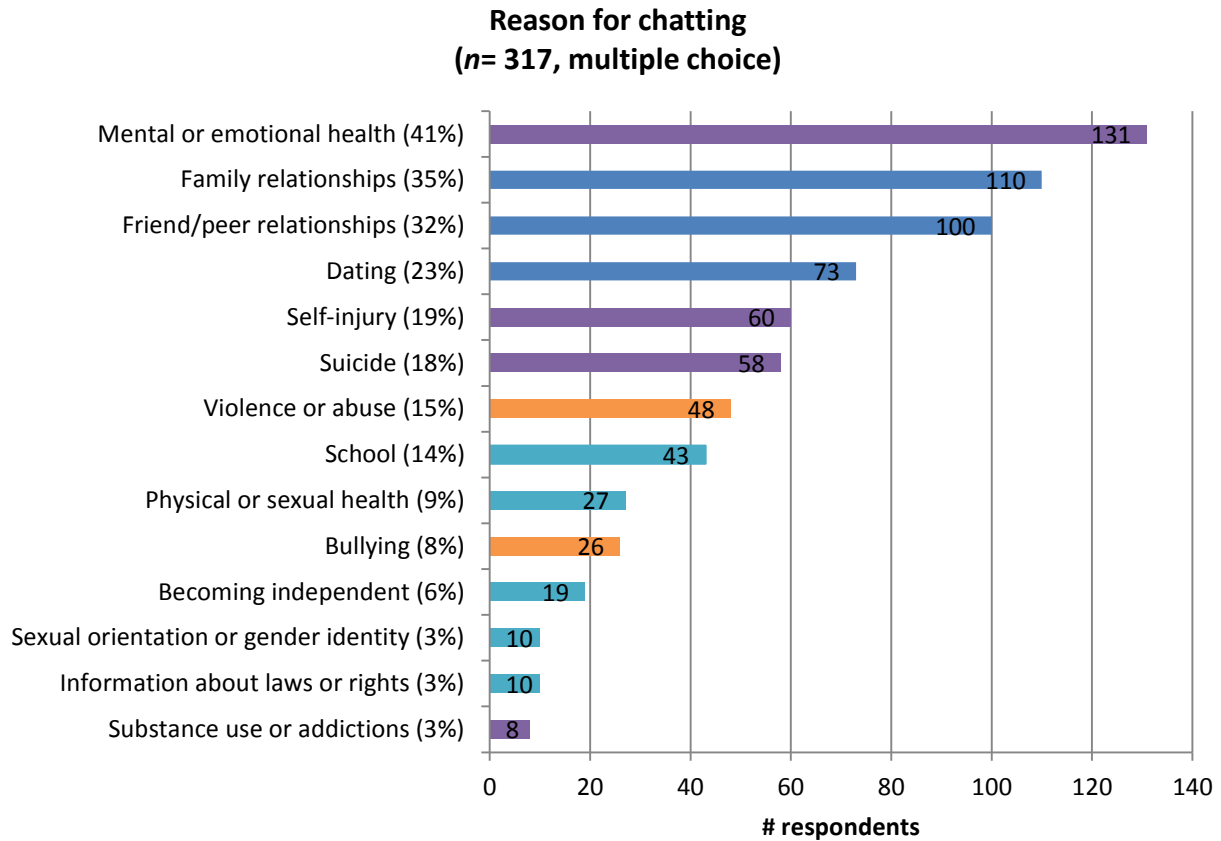
Community type (*n*= 347): While the bulk of our respondents stated they lived in a city or large town (231 respondents for 67% of our sample), a large proportion lived in rural areas or small towns (109 respondents for 32% of our sample). 3 respondents stated they lived in a First Nations community (1% of our sample). 4 stated “other.”

Gender (*n*= 347): 309 or 89% of our sample were female and 37 or 11% male. Only one of our 347 *Live Chat* pre-post survey respondents self-identified as trans/genderqueer.

Age (*n*= 347): The bulk of our respondents were 14 or 15 (140 or 40% of our sample). This was followed by 17 year olds at 13% (44), and 13 year olds at 12% (41) of our total sample. Please see appendix B for the full age distribution.

⁹ Data source: 2011 telephone bill & Flexiforum user accounts - 55% of incoming calls and 50% of incoming web posts were from Ontario. Clients from Quebec made up 11% of all telephone service and 13% of all post service.

Problem, situation or issue (n= 317): Most respondents indicated that they brought more than one issue to Kids Help Phone (i.e., our 317 respondents selected 723 issues). The chart below shows the number of respondents who selected each issue option; percentages are included in brackets. Mental or emotional health was the top self-identified reason for accessing support (purple bars). This was followed by family, peer and then dating relationship issues (darker blue bars).



Reason for Chatting

“I needed to talk about a comment my therapist made to me that made me feel worst about myself who is from the community mental health centre i go to.”

“I’m scared.”

“because i needed to let it out and try and get more info”

“My parents suggested it, so I can have more ideas about what to do.”

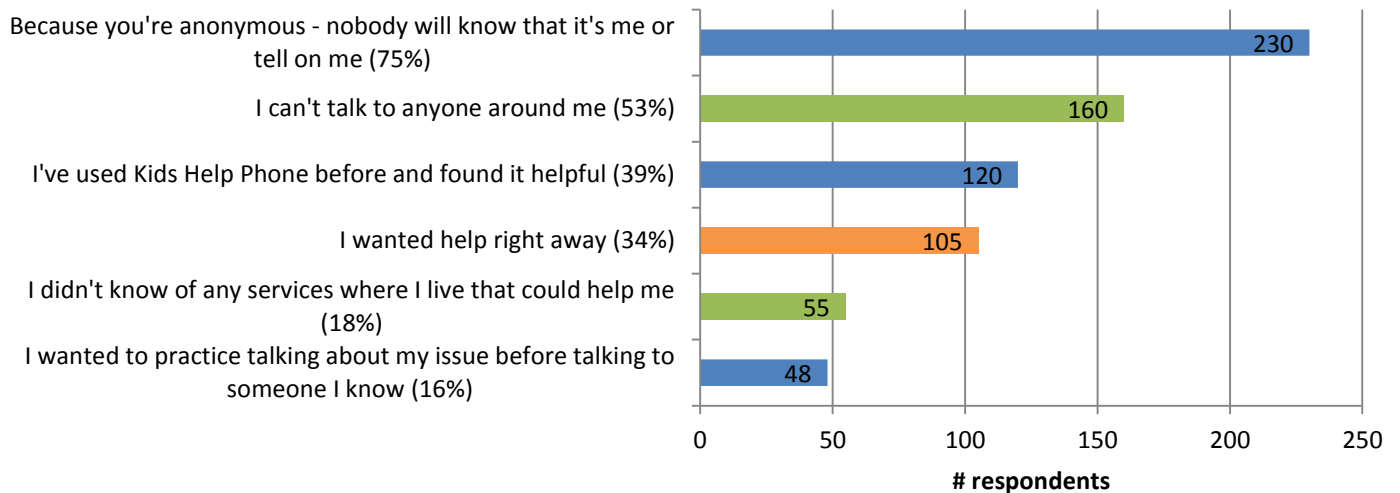
“I come here when I feel I can’t talk to my mom and in this case she is not ok with my sexual orientation”

« c’est le seul service qui offre un clavardage »

Connection to Other Supports

Kids Help Phone vs. Local Supports (n= 305): Our service promise of anonymity and confidentiality was identified by 75% of our respondents as a reason why they accessed Kids Help Phone instead of talking directly to a person or visiting a service in their community. 39% stated they had used the service before and found it helpful. 53% of our respondents stated there was nobody local they could speak with, and 18% were not aware of appropriate local supports. 34% of our respondents indicated they wanted help right way. 16% contacted Kids Help Phone because they wanted to practise talking out their issue before raising their concern with someone they know.

Why did you choose to contact KHP instead of talking to a person or visiting a service in your community? (n= 305, multiple choice)



Kids Help Phone Instead of Local Supports

"I needed quick help, as my family was still fighting."

« c'est le seul service qui offre un clavardage »

"i'm embaressed to talk to someone i know"

"You understand better and don't judge."

"im scared to talk out thing to other people cause i might get them into trouble"

"People listened but didn't want to understand."

"It's hard to talk face-to-face, running the risk of crying... etc."

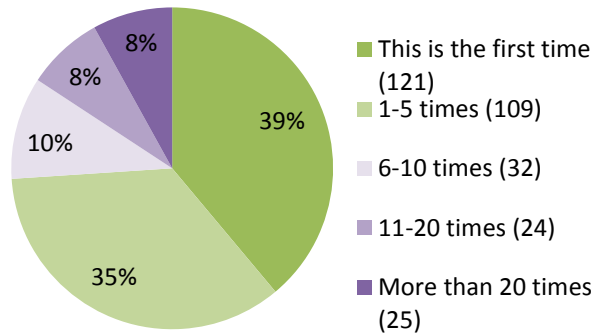
"I can't really talk to anyone because they don't know the problem and I'm scared about how their gunna react"

"I had no idea who to contact & I can't talk to anyone around me about it"

Relationship With Kids Help Phone

Number of times contacting Kids Help Phone (n= 311): The majority of our respondents were new clients. The largest proportion of our respondents indicated that this was the first time they had ever

**How many times have you contacted Kids Help Phone?
(n= 311)**



contacted Kids Help Phone. This was followed by respondents who had previously reached out 1 to 5 times. Combined, 26% of our respondents had received support on more than six occasions.

While not the strongest indicator of the number of returning chat clients (or repeat survey respondents), 20 chat usernames had at least one exact duplicate within our sample of 347 respondents. 13 of these usernames showed up twice, and 7 showed up 3 to 6 times.

Returning Clients

"kids help phone for me is a place to just chat with someone about your problem with someone trusty i love kids help phone and my counsler"

"It's friendly and a safe place to talk and to not feel embarrassed about it :)"

"Because KHP is there to help- I know that letting out is a better alternative to keeping it in, and a service like this seemed like the only person/thing I could trust"

"I saw your advertisement on a smarties box [candy] and knew that this was a good place to talk"

Chatting interface (n= 236) & technical

problems (n= 347): The majority of our respondents chatted with their counsellor via a computer (194 or 82%). At 42 or 18%, a noteworthy number of clients chatted via their smartphone or mobile device.

Post-chat, we asked respondents if they experienced technical problems. While we had hoped to cross-reference technical issues with the chatting interface to see if one tended to have problems more than the other, none of our respondents indicated that they had experienced technical issues (n=344). This said, more than half of the 40 verbatim responses we received (23 or 7% of our total sample of 347) stated they had experienced connectivity problems that interfered with their chat counselling session.

Technical Problems

"Chat froze but I got reconnected with the same counsellor luckily!"

"Chat fucking closed on me randomly. I'm so mad and dont know what to do."

"All of a sudden, it wouldn't let me type anymore"

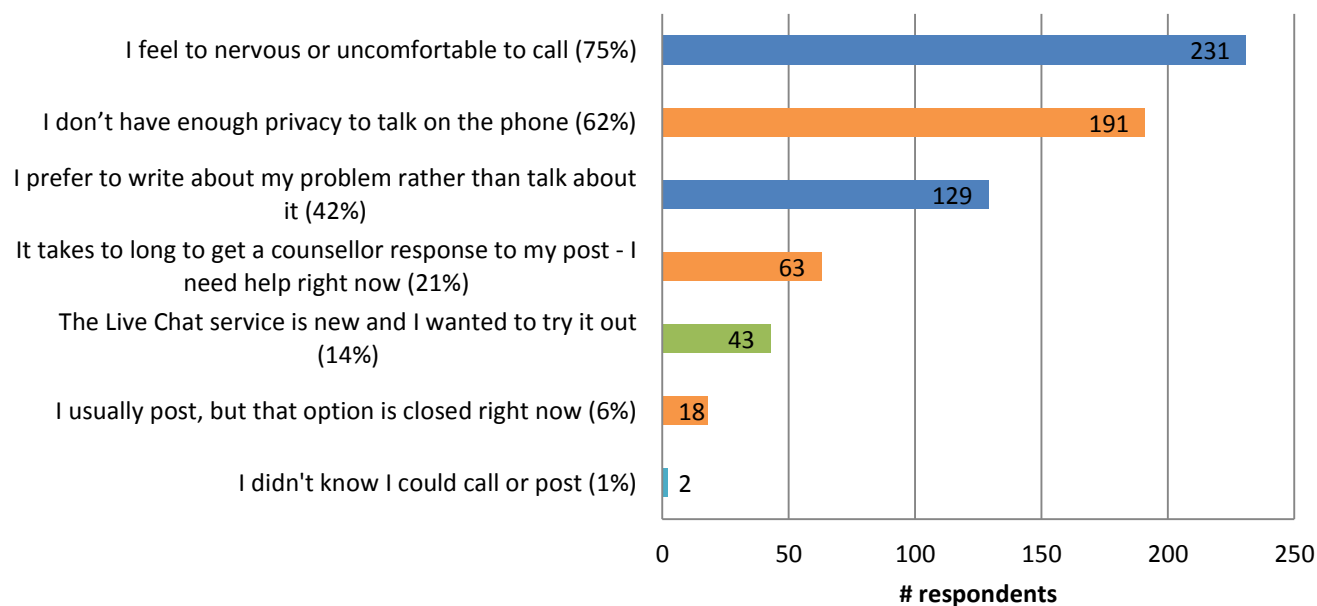
"Im not sure.. But they kept taking a really long time to answer"

"My conversation froze in the spot where you type your message. It sent but I couldn't send any more messages and the person left because I couldn't respond"

"sometimes the counsellors messages didn't come through. if they wrote more than one i wouldn't get the second one until after i wrote something but it still showed up before my messages"

Preferred Counselling Medium (n= 307): Reinforcing the importance of providing a text-based means of communication in tandem with our ear-to-ear telephone service, 75% of our respondents stated they were too nervous or uncomfortable to call our helpline. Not having enough privacy to call was a concern for 62% of our respondents. 42% stated they preferred writing over talking.

What did you choose chat instead of phone or post? (n= 307)



Preferred Counselling Medium

"This service is excellent and it is a lot safer than calling because there when you do this you wont get caught but you might when you call."

"im not going to a counsellor for a week and the chat was better than talking on the phone because no one could hear me do it"

"My teacher said that I should since I'm to shy to talk to in person"

"it's easier to talk on chat than on the phone"

"My cell phone company wont allow me to call toll-free calls at a balance of 0.00 cents, costs to make a toll free call, to place one as calling a local number."

"I can't talk on the phone, and I have no trusted adults or relatives."

"cause ill probably start crying"

"Faster and more private than calling"

"I don't like talking on the phone"

"i dont know how to express my sel fon the phone"

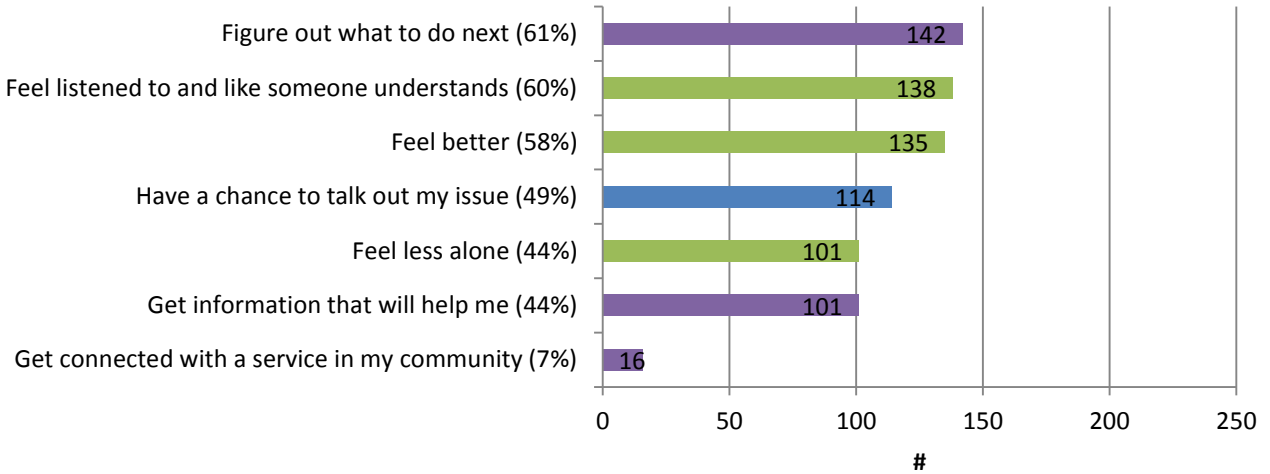
"I'm sick at the moment and i cant talk"

Client Satisfaction

Client Expectations of Live Chat Counselling (n= 232): Given the strengths and limits of text-based communication, knowing our client's expectations of the service is especially helpful. Before our clients chatted with a counsellor we asked *"what do you expect will happen by the time your chat with a counsellor is finished?"* and then after the chat we asked *"did the chat help you in the way that you expected it to?"*

The top expectations chosen by our respondents include, at 61%, the solution-oriented *"figure out what to do next,"* and at 60%, the more process and emotion oriented expectation *"feel listened to and like someone understands."* These were followed by *"feel better,"* at 58% of our respondents. Almost half of our respondents wanted the chance to talk out their issue and 44% wanted useful information. 44% of our respondents also hoped to feel less alone. Only 7% of our respondents were looking for a referral to a local service.

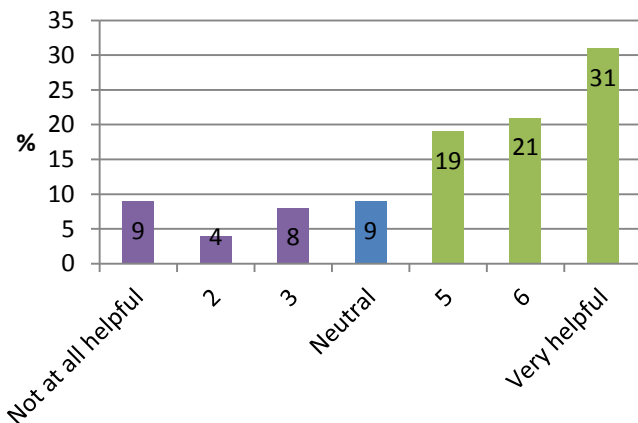
What do you expect will happen by the time your chat with a counsellor is finished?
(n= 232, multiple choice)



After-chat counselling, 52% (182) stated their experience had matched their expectations, followed by 30% (105) who stated their expectations were met somewhat (n= 347). 17% (60) stated their expectations had not been met. The main hope of 65% of those whose expectations were not met had been to “figure out what to do next” (n= 37).

Helpfulness of Live Chat Counselling (n= 341): After chat counselling we asked “how helpful was your chat overall” and provided a 7-point scale where 1= not at all helpful and 7= very helpful. 70% (240) of our respondents indicated their chat session was helpful (green bars in the chart to the left), 9% (30) were neutral (blue bar).

How helpful was your chat overall?
(n= 341)



70% (240) of our respondents indicated their chat session was helpful (green bars in the chart to the left), 9% (30) were neutral (blue bar). Similar to the proportion of respondents who stated their expectations had not been met (17% or 60), 21% (71) did not find their chat session helpful (purple bars).

To help us better understand the responses from those who did not find the service helpful (purple bars), we took a look at the issues this group contacted Kids Help Phone about (n= 317). Not surprising given their proportion among all respondents, top issue were mental and emotional health (29

respondents) and family relationships (21 respondents). 18 indicated suicide and 17 self-injury (please recall that this was a multiple choice question so overlap of issues is to be expected).

Perceived Helpfulness

"i couldnt talk that much and we were getting off topic."

"It went well, I got the help and advice I needed."

"i told the counsellor about some problems i was having and they helped me feel better about what happened and helped me become more positive"

"I talked to a counsellor who pretty much advised me to call. I wanted to chat online, not call."

"Talked got advice and excellent support. Thank you so much."

"the counselor was amazing, he/she listened well and really helped, thanks"

"They were very nice and helped me a lot"

Recommend Kids Help Phone to a Friend (n= 311): Overall, 266 or 86% of chatters said they would recommend Kids Help Phone to a friend. 45 or 15% said they would not.

We also looked at whether the group that did not find their chat helpful would recommend Kids Help Phone to a friend. Suggesting that we explore in greater detail the question of chat helpfulness in future studies, more than half (58% or 36 respondents) of those who did not find their chat session helpful stated they *would* suggest the service to a friend (n= 62). While this group rated their particular session as not helpful, they still perceive the service to be helpful in some fashion.

Client Outcomes

For this evaluation of our *Live Chat* pilot, we focused on measuring change in three variables: feelings of **distress**, **clarity** about what to do about their situation or concern, and **confidence** that they can cope with or change their situation. To do this, we asked three 7-point scaling questions before the young person chatted with the counsellor, and then we asked the same three scaling questions after they finished chatting.

Before chat counselling

*Thinking about the reason why you are contacting us (your situation, issue, or question): On a scale of 1 to 7, how do you **feel** right now?*

Very bad

Very good



After chat counselling

*Thinking about the reason why you contacted us (your situation, issue, or question): On a scale of 1 to 7, how do you **feel** right now?*

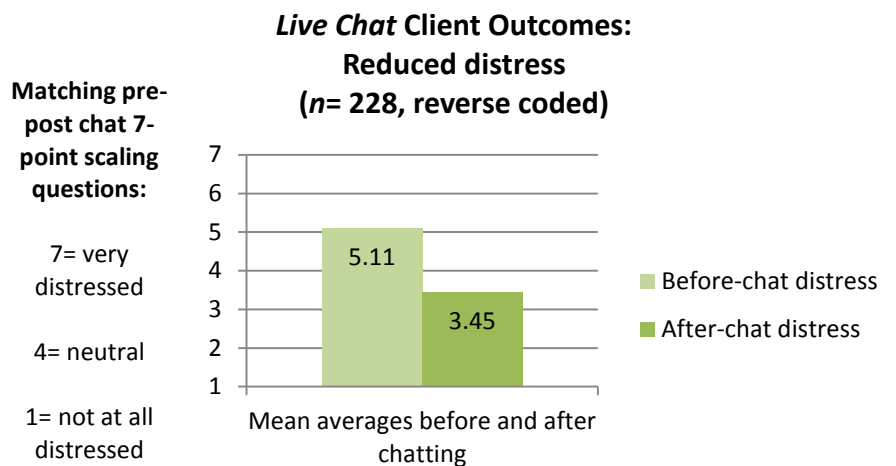
Very bad

Very good

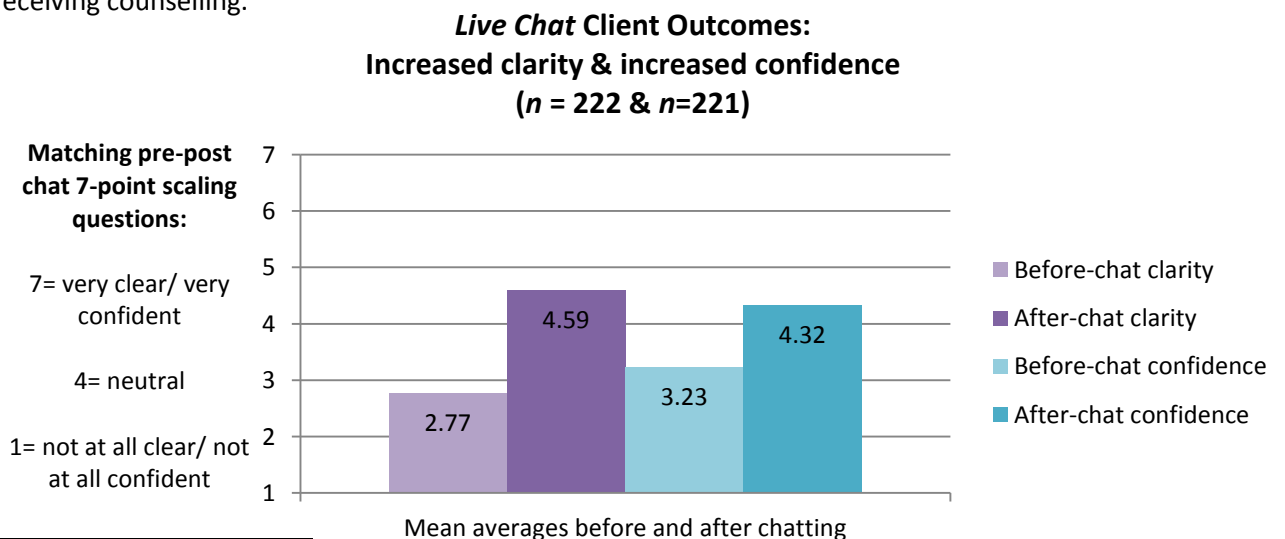


Mean averages before and after working with a *Live Chat* counsellor are shown in the charts below. Lighter colours are for before-chat scores and darker for after-chat scores.

In this first chart, green bars measure a reduction in client distress. 1= not at all distressed and 7= very distressed.¹⁰ Before chatting with a counsellor, our respondents' average distress rating was just over 5, where 7 is the highest possible level of distress. After chatting with a counsellor, our respondents' distress was reduced by an average of over 1.5 points (1.66 points, to be precise), dropping to just under 3.5 on this same scale. This is a statistically significant reduction [$t = -14.58, p < .0001$], meaning that this positive change pre-to-post counselling was very likely not due to chance.



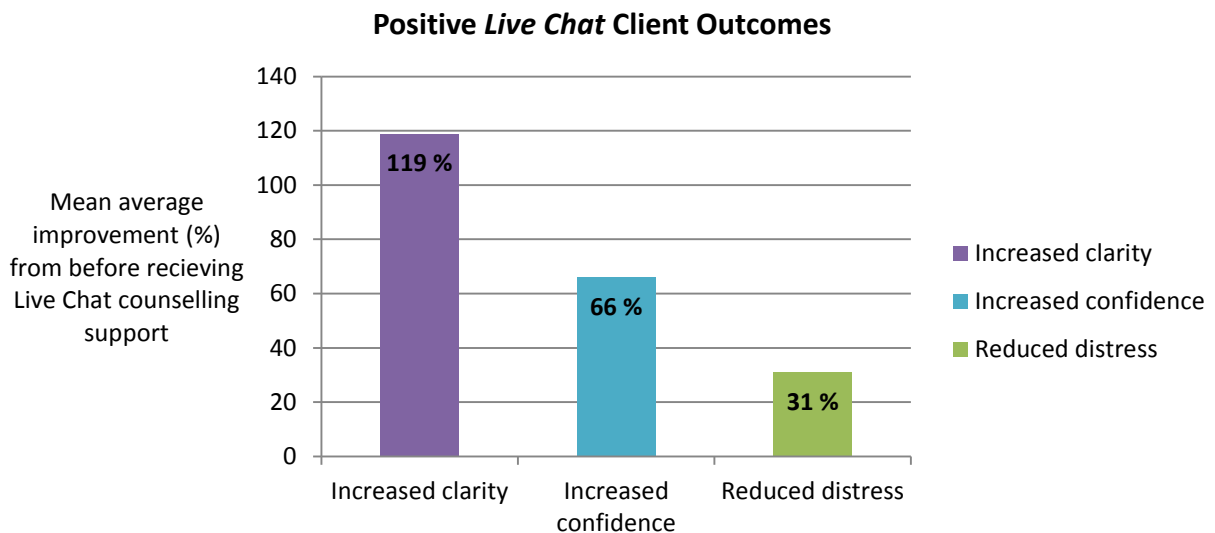
In the next chart, purple bars show average responses pre-to-post chat counselling for the question, “Do you have a **clear idea** about what to do to cope with your change your situation?” and the blue bars show responses to “How **confident** are you that you can cope with your change your situation?” In contrast to the previous chart measuring a reduction in distress, in this chart, we hope to see an *increase* on our 7-point scale. As we can see, respondents average clarity rating was 2.77 before working with a counsellor and 4.59 after working with a counsellor. This is a statistically significant different self-reported improvement in clarity of just under 2 points (1.815 to be precise) on our 7-point scale [$t = 12.54, p < .0001$]. Clients also reported a statistically significant improvement in self-reported confidence after counselling with mean confidence scores increasing 1.09 points on a 7-point scale [$t = 8.51, p < .0001$], increasing from 3.23 up to 4.32 after receiving counselling.



¹⁰ Distress scores are reverse coded.

Chat counselling was associated with both statistically significant positive change across all three intended outcomes – client distress was reduced and their clarity and confidence about what to do increased. None of these positive changes were likely due to chance. Of these three variables, clients started their session with the poorest self-rating in clarity, then in distress and then in confidence. The highest (best) outcomes and the largest change follow this same order, with the greatest improvement and highest overall rating post-counselling in client clarity about what to do to cope with or change their situation. This was followed by a reduction in distress and last, an increase in confidence that they can cope with or change their situation.

We can also talk about these changes from before to after counselling in percentages.¹¹ Please note that the lower each individual respondent’s starting score, the greater percentage weighting there is for each post-chat point of improvement on our 7-point scale. For example, if a client rated their confidence at 1 (not at all confident) before they received support and 2 after they received support, that one point increase is 100% of their starting rating. If they rated themselves at 5 before receiving counselling and 6 after counselling (were 7 is very confident), that one point of change would only be a 20% increase. As we can see in the chart that follows, this means our clients can experience an improvement of more than 100% from their starting self-reported rating. On average, our respondents experienced a self-reported increase in clarity about how to cope with or change their problem of 119% by the end of their chat counselling session. Their confidence that they can cope with or change their situation increased by an average of 66%. Finally, our respondents self-reported distress was reduced by an average of 31%.



¹¹ These percentages were calculated by subtracting each respondent’s self-reported post-chat counselling rating from their initial pre-counselling rating. The resulting number is their “change score.” We then expressed these change scores as a percent of each respondent’s original score and found the mean average across all our respondents.

$$\frac{Feel_Change * 100}{PreFeelto7_rc}$$

Please note that this amount of change is based on each client’s individual self-reported change pre-to-post counselling (e.g., this change is not in comparison to all youth in Canada or against some absolute measure of these three variables).

Positive Client Outcomes

"I feel a lot of weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

"The counsellor was really nice, and I'm glad I had someone to talk to. It made things seem a little less overwhelming and intimidating."

"My counsellor was amazing, and helped me not resort to self harm. Thank you."

"She helped me from committing suicide. KHP is amazing."

Referrals (n= 331): Providing a useful benchmark for our new counselling medium (and related to solution-focused planning work) 24% (75) of our respondents stated they received a referral during their chat session.

Providing Chat Counselling

The experiences of providing chat counselling were captured through three surveys completed by counsellors at the end of training, the pilot mid-point, and the pilot end. Further nuances were gathered through a series of facilitated chat clinical discussions held at the end of the pilot period. Major themes are reported here, and then selected themes are juxtaposed with respondents' answers to the pre-post chat survey question *"Is there anything else you would like us to know?"*

The technical and clinical preparedness of counsellors improved over the course of the pilot. Most counsellors reported that chat counselling is more satisfying than Internet web post forum counselling. A number of counsellors stated that chat counselling shifts longer than two hours compromise their ability to provide high quality service.

Overarching observations from counsellors:

- Kids really love it.
- Chat is definitely reaching young people who would not otherwise access our service (e.g., those who are extremely shy). While some of these clients may eventually call the helpline, there are likely a significant number who never will.
- Chat may be functioning as "PR" for the rest of the services Kids Help Phone provides. One counsellor gave the example of a first time caller who reached the counsellor they had chatted with a few months previously.
- Chat may not be as accessible to low-income youth who do not have a computer at home. Remote communities without any internet access will also be excluded.
- Chat clients are more likely to raise embarrassing, sensitive, and taboo concerns.
- Chat clients are bringing forward a larger proportion of serious issues and are more readily disclosing serious experiences (e.g., trauma). Chat clients also disclose more detail about these experiences than is typically expressed over the telephone.
- Responding to serious, timely concerns is more difficult over chat (i.e., getting emergency medical services to a chat client).
- It takes longer to communicate over chat. This, plus the higher proportion of very serious issues, means counselling sessions over the chat medium are the longest of all our counselling media.

Challenges

While counselling staff report few problems transferring skills used with the telephone medium to the new chat medium, there were some challenging areas worth addressing in both new counsellor training and ongoing counselling supervision:

- **Severity of issues:** Counsellors reported a much higher proportion of serious concerns raised by youth over the chat medium. Working with these more serious issues presents challenges given the slower pace of text-based communication. Limited emotional cues can also make it difficult to stay connected to witnessing-related counselling work (i.e., staying with empathetic listening rather than moving to solution-finding work).
- **Emergency chats & direct intervention:** While some counsellors reported being able to refer emergency chats (e.g., recent/imminent assault, or an attempt to die by suicide) to the appropriate local supports, others had experiences where the chatter was not willing to be connected to local assistance.
 - **Suicide and self-harm related chats:** In the absence of auditory cues, it is more difficult to know what is happening right then for the chatter. Given the potential immediate seriousness of suicidal ideation and some forms of self-harm, this uncertainty is especially uncomfortable for counsellors.
- **Encouraging chat clients to call:** Given the time and direct intervention limits of the chat service, counsellors will encourage some callers dealing with complex, heavier issues and those dealing with emergency issues to call the helpline. It is challenging to assess the right level of encouragement without inadvertently “shutting down” chatters who will not call no matter what.
- **Repeat Clients:** Counselling Services reports that chat has a core group of returning clients, a number of whom appear to ensure they receive service by waiting for the queues to open at the beginning of service hours. The concern is that given the limited number of possible chat sessions, this group of returning clients is impeding the hoped-for accessibility of the chat medium for particular sub-populations of youth who may face barriers to accessing our other service media (e.g., deaf youth).
 - **Different “types” of repeat chatters:** There appear to be a number of different types of repeat chatters: Those with more serious issues that are not amiable to solutions; those with serious issues who are at times abusive in how they communicate with counsellors, and; those clients who are lonely and want to talk about life in general.
- **Number of issues per session, and the order in which they arise:** Counsellors report a high level of variation in number of presenting issues and how soon they arise in the chat. Exploring the initial presenting issue may surface additional related concerns. Clients may also bring up multiple concerns. Assessing the weighting and importance of each, the connection between issues, and determining a helpful focus/number of related concerns for each chat is at times quite challenging. This is especially true given the delay in response time inherent to this medium.

- **Circular conversations:** Sometimes related to the number of issues included in a particular chat and sometimes related to the client’s narrative style, containing and focusing circular or repetitive chats can be difficult. Again, the delay in back-and-forth text communication exacerbates this challenge.
- **Conveying emotional tone and depth:** The largest challenge reported by counsellors is in conveying emotional tone or depth via text. Finding one’s comfort level with text-based communication of emotion and “trusting” that it will be interpreted as genuine by the client takes time.

What Works Well

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) and Narrative Therapy were the most frequently recommended therapeutic approaches for the chat medium. The limited time available to work with clients makes the goal setting aspects of SFBT particularly useful for focusing a session. Narrative really allows the client to explore their situation in a different way. Things that work particularly well over chat include:

- Encouraging and giving feedback about the chatter’s communication and self-expression.
- Scaling questions, coping questions and very opened ended questions.
- Summarizing and restating; the client gets to see what they have expressed in one concise piece of writing.
- Using analogies to clarify the point.
- Assigning tasks.
- Grounding body work (e.g., breathing and muscle relaxation exercises).
- Providing links to website content (e.g., KHP’s Info Booth)

Counsellor advice to new chat counsellors:

- Don't panic - There is time to think and type, and there is no rush.
- Tap into your ability to be patient, this method of counselling takes longer.
- For those less familiar with this form of communication – it gets easier!
- Pay attention to the smaller cues that are available: username, age, city/town and province all provide useful information.
- Attend to the language level of the chatter throughout the whole chat as this will provide direction for formulating accessible responses.
- Attend to the emotion words chatters use frequently to describe how they feel. These are really helpful for understanding nonverbal cues we cannot otherwise assess.
- Let them do the typing; if you keep jumping in they will type less and you are doing more of the work.

- Make notes of points you want to raise but follow the direction of the chatter. Return to your points only where appropriate.
- Sit with the youth in their feelings before rushing to find a solution (this can feel really different in comparison to working on the phones because of the lack of emotional cues).
- Chatters can express a lot of detail and depth of experience; be prepared for deep disclosures. Chatters will write details that they would not necessarily say out loud over the telephone. This can be really intense for counsellors.

In Their Own Words: “Is there anything else you would like us to know?”

79 of our respondents provided qualitative responses to this open-ended post-chat counselling question. 58% (46) expressed appreciation for the service, 30% (24) provided a critique, and 12% (9) offered some other feedback or comment,

Appreciative feedback:

- *“I wish the chat would stay forever just like the phone service.”*
- *“Im glad that the counsellor was patient with me throughout the whole conversation.”*
- *“Keep the online chat. It's very helpful for someone who doesn't want to talk about it, but write about it.”*
- *“C'était excellent. Bonne interaction. Beaucoup de patience.”*
- *“my counselor was awesome I am soo happy that kids help phone is a place to just let it to someone thanks”*
- *“that it's really great having these chat sessions they do make a differenc and i recomend to have them open more ofter”*
- *“That whoever talked to me I thank you son much u really helped”*
- *“that you all are so nice to give up your time to help me out you dont know how thankfull i am to have you guys”*
- *“this person was amazing! I don't know who it was but if it's possible to find out, please congratulate them for doing their job SOOOOO well!”*

Critical feedback: Critical feedback from our respondents provides us with helpful insight into the possibilities and constraints of our new chat medium. The higher proportion of very serious issues, the necessarily slower pace of text-based chat communication, and challenges understanding or matching the client’s emotional tone are all illustrated in the following quotes. In coding both the main themes from our counsellors’ chat clinical discussions and qualitative feedback provided by our survey respondents, it became apparent that most client critiques mirrored the overarching challenges raised by our counsellors. Collectively, these experiences provide direction for further developing the ways in which we train, supervise and provide chat counselling support.

Chat counselling challenges raised by counsellors

Negative impact of wait times and connectivity issues

Chat session length and the need to limit the number of issues discussed

Assessing and responding to emotional tone and depth in the absence of auditory emotional cues

Balancing emotional and solution-focused counselling work

Encouraging chat clients with serious /complex issues to call the helpline

Chat survey respondent critiques

"i havent been having much luck with the chat lately, every time I come on, I have huge wait times and then when I actually do get to speak with a counsellor they dont seem very interested and take a long time to answer me.....I end up having to ask if they are still there before I get an answer."

"I feel like at the end the counsellor sort of rushed to end the conversation without really asking if I had other questions."

"Counsellor kept on trying to find answers for me, or provide a solution. [...]I was looking for someone to talk to because I felt alone. As much as I'd love to say that this helped me, it didn't. And I'm upset and alone. I don't have the privacy to call the number from a phone, so I had to use this [...]"

"...the counsellor just advised me to call and kind of ignored my problems."

Non-counselling feedback included: Most other feedback related to wait times and the chat interface itself.

- *"Can I volunteer and help kids out? :)"*
- *"i have to go have supper. if their was a pause button and they could reply to messages it might be better."*
- *"i think there should be a beep or an indication that we got a reply from the counsellor, that way, we know that we got a message if we have something else opened[another page]"*
- *"I wish they responded quicker I had to leave before I really had a chance to say stuff"*
- *"It would be nice to be able to keep in contact with the counselor I had because I really like her."*

Discussion & Conclusions

Findings from this initial evaluation of our *Live Chat* pilot provide us with important insights into the ways in which the addition of this service medium expands our capacity to support children and youth in Canada. Chat counselling was accessed via a mobile device by 18% of our respondents. In comparison to our other direct service media, chat is supporting a much higher proportion of French speaking youth and youth from the province of Québec. Our service's promise of anonymity and confidentiality was selected by 75% of our respondents as the reason why they chose Kids Help Phone over local supports. 75% of respondents stated they chose chat because they were too nervous or uncomfortable to call the helpline directly. 62% cited not having enough privacy as their reason for chatting instead of calling.

Text-based chat is a more challenging medium through which to provide counselling, in comparison to telephone counselling, as it provides space for deep disclosures and is more likely to be accessed by young people dealing with serious issues. Chat clients are more likely to raise mental and emotional health concerns, and provide more details about their experience than they would likely express out loud. At the same time, it is more difficult to understand emotional nuance through this form of text-based communication. The slow pace and extended length of chat counselling makes it more challenging to determine a focus and manageable number of issues.

Our respondent's expectations of the chat service appear to be weighted towards emotion-focused hopes (versus solution-oriented hopes), however this deserves more attention in future studies. Only 16 (7%) of our chatters had hoped to get a referral to a local support. 70% of our respondents found their chat session helpful, and 82% stated their expectations of the service were met or somewhat met. Suggesting an area deserving of more nuanced exploration, more than half of those who did not find their chat session helpful stated they would still suggest the service to a friend.

Our respondents experienced statistically significant positive changes across all three of the outcomes evaluated. While we can also talk about these positive changes in terms of movement on a scale, in summary, our respondents experienced an average reduction in self-reported distress of 31% from their pre-chat rating. The average increase in self-reported confidence was 66%. In comparison to how they rated themselves before receiving chat counselling, our respondents experienced an average increase of 119% in how clear they were about how to cope with our deal with their concern.

Grounded in the guiding principles outlined by our Board of Directors back in 2010, the pilot launch of our *Live Chat* counselling service has been a success. Responding to young people's preferred mode of communication and in alignment with the organization's overarching service philosophy, the chat medium expands both the accessibility and scope of Kids Help Phone's professional counselling supports. The evaluation of this pilot provides us with both initial benchmarks and important information about the challenges and possibilities of our newest service platform.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A: Pilot Launch Pre-Post *Live Chat* Survey

- 9 Pre-Chat Questions -

Welcome to our Live Chat counselling service!

If you need to reach a counsellor quickly, please call us at 1-800-668-6868 or, if it's an emergency, call 911.

* Required info

* Nickname (not your real name):

* Are you: {Female; Male; Trans/Genderqueer

* How old are you?

* Province/Territory:

* What kind of **community** do you live in?

- City or large town (more than 10,000 people)
- Rural area or small town (less than 10,000 people)
- A First Nations community or Métis settlement
- Other:

Optional info

Help us make live chat better.

We're going to ask you some questions now and after your chat. Your answers are completely anonymous.

Your counsellor will NOT be able to see them.

1. How are you chatting with us today?

- Smartphone/mobile device
- Computer

2. What do you expect will happen by the time your chat with a counsellor is finished?
Choose as many as you like.

I expect to:

- Feel better
- Figure out what to do next
- Feel listened to and like someone understands
- Get information that will help me
- Have a chance to talk out my issue
- Feel less alone
- Get connected with a service in my community
- Other:

Thinking about the reason why you are contacting us (your situation, issue, or question):

3. On a scale of 1 to 7, how do you feel right now?

Very bad

Very good

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Do you have a clear idea about what to do to cope with or change your situation?

Not at all clear

Very clear

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. How confident are you that you can cope with or change your situation?

Not at all confident

Very confident

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Submit your answers to begin Live Chat:

Thank you for using our Live Chat counselling service.

Now that we've chatted

Now that you have chatted with a counsellor, we will ask you follow-up questions that match the ones you answered earlier. Your counsellor will not be able to see your responses.

1. Did you just chat with a counsellor?

- Yes
- No

2. Did you have any technical problems with chat today?

- Yes
- No

If so, please tell us what happened:

3. **Did the chat help you** in the way that you expected it to?

- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

4. **How helpful** was your chat session overall?

Not at all helpful

Very helpful

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4b. **Is there anything else** you would like us to know?

5. Did your counsellor give you a **referral** (i.e. information about a service in your community)?

- Yes
- No

Thinking about the reason why you contacted us (your situation, issue, or question):

6. On a scale of 1 to 7, **how do you feel** right now?

Very bad

Very good

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. Do you have a **clear idea** about what to do to cope with or change your situation?

Not at all clear

Very clear

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. **How confident** are you that you can cope with or change your situation?

Not at all confident

Very confident

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Kids Help Phone and you

9. **What issue** or issues did you contact us about today? Choose as many as apply.

- Friend/peer relationships
- Family relationships
- Dating
- Violence or abuse
- Bullying
- Mental or emotional health
- Substance use or addictions
- Physical or sexual health
- School
- Information about laws or rights

- Sexual orientation or gender identity
- Becoming independent
- Self-injury
- Suicide

10. Why did you choose to contact Kids Help Phone, instead of talking to a person or visiting a service in your community? Check as many as you like.

- Because you're anonymous – nobody will know that it's me or tell on me
- I wanted to practice talking about my issue before talking to someone I know
- I can't talk to anyone around me
- I wanted help right away
- I didn't know of any services where I live that could help me
- I've used Kids Help Phone before and found it helpful
- Other reason:

11. Why did you choose chat, instead of phone or post? Please check all that apply:

- The live chat service is new I wanted to try it out
- I feel too nervous or uncomfortable to call
- I don't have enough privacy to talk on the phone
- It takes too long to get a counsellor response to my post - I need help right now
- I prefer to write about my problem rather than talk about it
- I usually post, but that option is closed right now
- I didn't know I could call or post
- Other reason:

12. Would you recommend Kids Help Phone to a friend?

- Yes
- No

13. How many times have you contacted Kids Help Phone?

- This is the first time.
- 1-5 times
- 6-10 times
- 11-20 times
- More than 20 times

14. Did you find out about live chat through The Jack Project?

- Yes
- No

Thanks for your feedback!

We will use your input to make Kids Help Phone's live chat more helpful to you and other young people who need our help in the future.

Appendix B: Additional Data Tables

