

Working as a Crisis Clinician with First Call for Chittenden County, I am lucky to work on a wonderful team of clinicians who are accustomed to being flexible and creative through high stress situations. COVID-19 added a new layer to that as we were facing a challenging and unfamiliar time alongside our community. As Dr. Ryerson mentioned, as a 24/7 team we had to transition seemingly overnight. We moved from our high energy call center to our home offices. We learned quickly how to assess high risk situations via video and phone calls when we were accustomed to sitting alongside clients face to face. As frontline workers we adjusted to new PPE guidelines and shared tips and tricks every single shift to improve the safety of our team and the clients that required in person assessments.

Last March we were prepared for an increase in crisis calls, however instead it felt eerily silent– like folks were in shock and waiting for this to pass. Then as time went on, we not only received calls from concerned folks struggling with suicidal thoughts, violence, or psychosis, but we also started getting new calls. We started hearing from high school students processing what it would be like to miss their senior prom or graduation. We heard from parents who had lost their job and were waiting on unemployment while trying to be the best parent, teacher, friend and coach their kids now needed them to be. We heard from folks who had relapsed after years of sobriety and encountered closed doors at support agencies when they needed them most. We heard from concerned adults trying to weigh difficult decisions like whether to risk COVID exposure to their aging parent through visiting them, or let them continue to feel isolated. It felt like everyone was feeling compounded grief- sharing loss after loss after loss. We heard from people in pain, trying to foster hope during an immensely challenging time, and that’s exactly what we have worked to do. We listen. We connect community members of all ages to local resources and we work with loved ones to boost support systems. We aim to help people foster resilience and find a source of hope.

I am lucky to work in a job where I hear life stories and am able to support folks through some of the darkest times in their lives. Although we get calls and complete crisis assessments every day, there are some that stick with us. One assessment this year that stands out was a teenage girl who had already been through more trauma than many adults will ever face, and continued to lack stability in her home environment. Her school counselor found a journal with a suicide note in it. When confronted about this note, this high schooler broke down sharing that she did not know who to talk to, but that she was feeling more alone than ever after being separated from her friends at school due to the pandemic. She shared that they were her support system, but since limiting school days, class sizes, and even hugs with friends, she felt completely isolated. She told me she couldn’t picture her future anymore. She couldn’t see herself going to college, finding a career or falling in love. She just could not imagine that actually happening. Sitting in her counselor’s office, we were able to create space for her to process the feelings she had been carefully keeping inside for months. We were able to work with her family and school to build support, answer questions about mental health and suicidal thoughts for that support system, and develop a plan to get her intensive treatment for the next few weeks, then build her support at home and open communication lines with her guardians moving forward. We were able to help her start to see a future again and recognize the supports all around her and the many people that cared about her. She is just one example of the people we interact with on a daily basis.

Maggie Ross – Crisis Clinician  
Testimony for 2/1/21 Presentation

Here we are, almost an entire year after we first started shutting things down and we continue to adjust to a changing world around us. Our crisis team has always been busy, but when 2020 challenged us with a global pandemic, heightened political and racial tension and an increased sense of hopelessness and isolation, we have had no option other than to come together, learn together and grow through it all. If you or someone you know are struggling to cope with the seemingly never ending changes in our world, we hope that you will reach out to our team, or the local crisis team in your area.