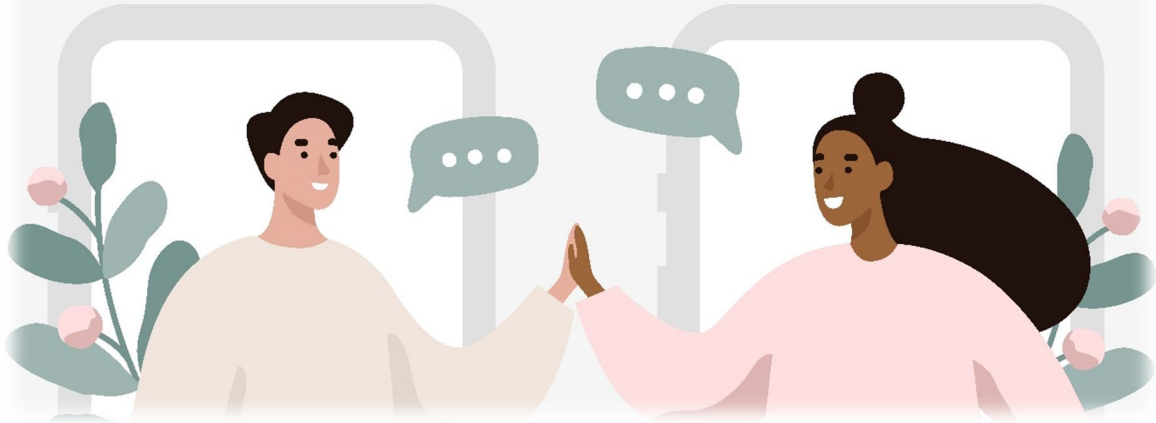


# Childhelp Child Abuse Crisis Counselors: Professional Quality of Life and Vicarious Resilience



## Introduction

Crisis counselor work is challenging and intense. Supporting trauma survivors can lead to adverse effects for the helping professional. Recent research confirms that in repeatedly listening to the traumatic events that their clients have experienced, therapists can begin to experience their own personal feelings of suffering. This topical brief provides insight into the lived experiences of a Childhelp hotline counselor responding to help-seekers during a pandemic. As research reveals more information about how individuals and communities respond to trauma, counselors develop better ways to prevent, identify and treat negative responses to traumatic events. Awareness of trauma's impact on survivors has grown, and it has also become possible to develop a greater understanding of the experiences of helping professionals.

The Childhelp counselor and supervisor focus groups provided a deep understanding of the professional lived experiences of child abuse hotline counselors. This included their ability to adapt as they encountered two unique types of work stressors, 1) the addition of text and chat services and 2) a worldwide pandemic, in addition to listening to distressing stories by help-seekers. Using a phenomenological methodology, this brief draws from focus group stories collected in 2021 to examine how the implementation of text and chat as well as COVID-19 and remote working altered the Childhelp counselors' professional quality of life. The counselors explored how they identify and build resiliency and provided insight into a newer concept called vicarious resiliency (VR). Presenting the counselor's stories can help advance the concept of VR as well as how VR can promote sustaining and empowering helping professionals in challenging times.

## Background

For more than 60 years, Childhelp has served children, families, and those seeking help in the prevention, intervention, and treatment of child abuse and neglect issues. An integral part of Childhelp is their National Child Abuse Hotline, staffed 24/7, 365 days a year by professional, degreed crisis counselors.

In 2018, Childhelp received a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service to enhance its phone hotline through the implementation of the Prevent Abuse of Children Text and Chat Hotline (PACTECH) Project. Grounded in a crisis intervention model, PACTECH provides professional counselor support through text and chat technologies for help-seekers looking for information, support, and resources related to child abuse.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of mitigation efforts to flatten the curve coincided with a spike in help-seekers and increased job demand for the hotline counselors. The Childhelp hotline is a trauma-informed program that recognized its counselors were at a greater risk of facing compassion fatigue and/or secondary trauma and partnered with the Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC) at Arizona State University to conduct counselor focus groups. The objective was to examine their lived experiences during a pandemic, including their experience with COVID-related stress at work, and their ability to protect themselves against compassion fatigue.

To date, research has focused primarily on the negative impact trauma work can have on practitioners. The vicarious impact of trauma work has been analyzed mainly through the concepts of vicarious traumatization (VT), secondary traumatic stress (STS), and

compassion fatigue (CF) (Figley & Kiser, 2013). VT, STS, and CF are concepts that identify the negative processes experienced by trauma counselors and explain how these counselors may develop adverse outcomes due to their work with trauma survivors. Yet, just looking at adverse effects can be stigmatizing (Rogers et al., 2016) and contributes to high turnover rates and other negative psychological and professional consequences among helping professionals (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Liebling et al., 2016).

More recently, a body of research has begun to identify positive outcomes of trauma work such as VR, identified as the vicarious learning process that can protect the counselors from work-associated distress (Edelkott et al., 2016). VR research uses the concept of resilience as a social, ecological process (Ungar, 2013) that can be transmitted between people.

Theoretically linked to the phenomenon of VT and resilience theory (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), VR involves changes to the counselor's inner world due to interacting with clients' trauma stories (Hernandez-Wolfe et al., 2015) and explores how trauma survivors are resilient by accessing adaptive processes and coping mechanisms to survive and even thrive in the face of adversity (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Increasing value is being placed on resiliency and transforming negative into positive aspects (Stamm, 2010).

Considering that much of the literature focuses on the stressful outcomes of trauma work for helping professionals, this brief applies an asset-based approach to advancing resilience by exploring the positive effects resulting from practitioners' experiences who work with trauma survivors.

## Methods

Focus groups were selected as the method of data collection to enhance personal accounts by capitalizing on peer-to-peer interactions and rapport, especially in a homogenous sample with shared experiences (Flowers et al., 2001). Study participants were Childhelp Hotline Counselors recruited using purposeful sampling in line with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) tradition which calls for a small, purposeful, and homogenous sample, in this case, a shared professional role and being from the same organization, that can speak to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

A phenomenological approach was essential to permit the hotline counselor's voices to be heard and experiences understood in learning a new way to support trauma survivors and help-seekers for the future (Nizza & Smith, 2021). Specifically, IPA was selected as it was best suited to explore the counselor's lived experiences navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic during an already transformative period for the hotline.

In addition, multi-perspective IPA designs have been adopted and shown that through the analysis and synthesis of multiple perspectives, it is possible to develop strong and persuasive analytic accounts (Larkin et al, 2019). Multi-perspective IPA designs are distinct from other qualitative methods in that the focus is on the idiographic analyses of patterns in people's meaning-making and how that can be used to influence the world. Analysis of data from these designs is focused on meaning, not causality. (Larkin, 2019).

## Focus Groups

This research brief looks at the 2021 focus groups which are a continuation of focus groups that began in 2019. The first focus group was arranged and conducted in the summer of 2019. The implementation of text and chat combined with COVID-19 increased both the volume and intensity of the Hotline. In May 2020, volume spiked and was estimated to be 40% higher than in May 2019 (Childhelp Impact Report, 2020). In 2020, focus groups with the counselors and supervisors were again organized to see how the new stressors and challenges impacted them.

This research brief will report on the findings of the 2021 focus groups. In 2021, three more focus groups with the counselors were completed. One with hotline supervisors (who also serve as counselors when needed), and hotline counselors that do not have any supervisory responsibilities. The counselors were further filtered by separating counselors who had been with the hotline for more than one year and those for less than a year. The separate focus groups allowed for more open discussions among the counselors and supervisors and their perspective with the added services and increased the number of help-seekers accessing the hotline.

As in 2020, the primary aim for 2021 was to better understand the hotline counselor and supervisor's professional quality of life while working with help-seekers using text and chat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To view the 2020 brief visit:

<https://childhelpline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Topical-Brief-COVID-19-Pandemic-Counselor-Experiences.pdf>

## Findings

Analysis of the 2021 focus group discussions brought forth three prominent themes: 1) **Vicarious Trauma & Resilience**; 2) **Mental Health Coaching**, and 3) **Systems & Support**. The first theme, Vicarious Trauma (VT) & Vicarious Resilience (VR), involves changes to the counselor's professional quality of life due to interacting with the help-seekers' trauma stories while observing resilience in others positively impacts the counselors. For the second theme, Mental Health Coaching, the counselors' role expands to meet the need of rising mental health issues by coaching help-seekers in developing coping skills for well-being. The third theme, Systems & Support denotes systemic factors that can cause or prevent burnout. System factors need to be addressed to decrease VT and increase VR with relationships and support. Stakeholders in the external environment also have an important role to play in preventing burnout.

### Vicarious Trauma & Resilience

The presence of vicarious resilience does not necessarily mean the absence of vicarious trauma (Killian et al., 2017). Counselors' descriptions of the positive and negative effects that they experienced during 2021 exhibited elements of both VT and VR. Counselors' experiences indicated the presence of emotional exhaustion and change in worldview by the intense issues raised by help-seekers, the frequency, and not knowing the outcome. These findings help define how simultaneous responses to trauma work can be explained and validated. Furthermore, while it is their primary role to listen and be present, feelings of helplessness seemed to exist if help-seekers needed more than emotional presence, or resisted help, or presented triggers for the counselor. Also, with

*"My favorite kind of definition that I've heard of vicarious trauma is that your worldview begins to change in response to the things that you've experienced or worked with people who've experienced it. I worked in homeless services and when I started, like driving down the street, and I would see a spot of shrubs or something, and be like, oh, that would be a good place to sleep. I realized my mind is changed because of the work that I do. This also with stories of sexual abuse, especially childhood sexual abuse, like, I think, there are so many things that I see or pay attention to now. Like, grooming behaviors and things like that."*

Childhelp Counselor

*"I had a text where the child literally said I'm in the closet using my tablet- Hurry up, I need this number for blah, blah, blah, before my mom takes my tablet or phone or whatever they were using. And of course, I'm like trying to do it super quick. And then I see when I go back to the page, I see it says, the person has left the chat. And you hope they call back or chat back. In this case, they actually did. I had them on a chat like maybe 10 minutes after that happened. So, I was glad about that. But um, you know, a lot of times you wish you can do more when you can, especially when they've done everything like called CPS, made a police report, and all of that, and you wish you could have given them more resources, but unfortunately, sometimes, you know, it's the investigation is still ongoing and they have to wait and you feel bad because you can't give more and the hard part is hoping that they've got the help that they needed because we don't get to follow up."*

Childhelp Counselor

such a varied group of help-seekers in which to serve, consistency seems to be a challenge. A few counselors reported being balanced in the sense that they had not experienced VT and had an

ability to cope with the distress and emotional impact. In considering VT, counselors also discussed the enjoyment of a challenge and learning about new resources to help others. Just as VT involves the change of the counselor through the engagement with clients' trauma stories, so too does the process of VR, but in a different, more positive, and healing direction. The VR literature contains evidence demonstrating that an understanding of traumatic processes and the capacity to reflect upon them are components that can reduce adverse effects and promote VR in practitioners focused on trauma work (Berger & Quiros, 2016; Neswald-Potter & Simmons, 2016). VR emerged when counselors described the positive impact and purpose that their job brings them. They shared experiences of meaning and growth derived from their work that helped them stay motivated and handle emotional stressors. They also discussed providing resources and reframing help-seekers perspectives as a way to help. The benefit is when the validation is returned to the counselor from the help seeker. In particular, counselors outline factors that they believe contribute to increased capacity to remain present while listening to trauma narratives and identify optimism and hope as essential qualities in practice. They also noted how the help seeker's resiliency positively impacted their self-perceptions and environment. Overall, counselors were able to easily define VT and its role in hotline work, however, the awareness of VT was not as strong as VR, thus giving more credence to how awareness of VR may be beneficial for shaping counselor relationships. Also, in line with VR research, counselors described how the hotline facilitates personal growth which gives them an increased sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.

*"I think, being able to realize the impact that we made, even if it was just during a two-minute call, or if it was a 15-minute call, I think that's very rewarding to notice that we've impacted someone's life just by giving them basic information that we already know. But I think it's really rewarding to be able to impact their life, even if it's just for that moment."*

Childhelp Counselor

*"I think about hearing all these situations that are not the same as mine, that are very, very different than mine, and seeing how resilient they have, or want to be, or are becoming. I think is very empowering as a counselor."*

Childhelp Counselor

## Mental Health Coaching

Counselors explained a soaring intensity of call, text, and chat on the hotline during COVID-19. Youth are having to weather isolation, fear, uncertainty, and counselors discussed hearing about more depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidality. Counselors also illustrated the importance of self-care for themselves and the

*"I've had a couple of times now, like 2 or 3 times, somebody reached out via text or chat that says, I want you to know how much your hotline has helped me and that you guys have saved my life. You guys have helped me get through my suicidal ideations. You guys helped me, you know, set positive boundaries, and just want to say thank you. These people reached out to us in a very dark time of their life. And now they're reaching back out to say, you helped me and look at where I'm at now. And so, it kind of gives you a little bit of hope."*

Childhelp Counselor

help-seekers. Empathizing with the help-seekers' struggles, in addition to coaching them with coping skills for change, felt rewarding and motivating to the counselors. Counselors with a mindset that believes abilities can be developed through practice and effort, stretch themselves to learn new things, and consider themselves capable of learning through experience. In a growth mindset, if counselors experience compassion fatigue, they may view it as an opportunity to cultivate resilience. Reframing negative circumstances and applying present learning to the development of future strategies.

*"One of the best questions that I have learned to ask during texts and chat conversations is - it is important that your voice is heard, what do you think would help the situation? Because if they are thinking, well, I'm just going to off my family, I'm going off myself, I'm going to go take drugs, I'm going to go drink, whatever their response is, it's usually not productive. Then we have to kind of bring them back down to reality. And tell them, well, this is what's going on, these are some possible solutions that are healthier than drinking or suicide, homicide, whatever it is, and so meeting them where they're at, I think, is one of the biggest things now."*

Childhelp Counselor

Counselors explained that they held positive feelings toward interactions with help-seekers that were challenging. Furthermore, supervisors unanimously discussed how it gave them positive feelings to help fellow counselors develop their skills and it gave them a sense of growth and newfound knowledge to add to their toolbox. The counselor's job is not to come up with the

solution but to support the help-seekers to find their own way and tap into their existing strengths and abilities. Much of the counselor's skills are using open-ended questions to allow the conversation to be opened up and facilitate the client to explore their situation and problem solve. The counselor expresses empathy and non-judgment and flexes coaching skills that help facilitate understanding in the next steps.

## Systems and Support

COVID has disrupted lives and has depleted support systems. The counselors claimed that relationships between co-workers and supervisors can be a source of support that buffers against stress. In addition, people who are survivors of trauma and who have healed from their own trauma are a vital source of

*"I had one a couple of weeks ago where it was a teenage girl whose dad had been sexually abusing her. And when her mom found out instead of supporting her, her mom kicked her out. So, I think it's really those situations where they're doing all the right things, but just nobody's set up to support them and they're not set up for success that I think those ones are the hardest. Just because you know they could be thriving if they were in the right environment."*

Childhelp Counselor

*"I think being able to support people through a system that is hard to navigate and often difficult and not what people expect or think. So just kind of, I almost see it as being like a translator between these two worlds and being able to link them and help people understand something that's really hard."*

Childhelp Counselor

support for others who have experienced trauma. Self-care is a component of safety and

protection that is active and can help produce positive people and perspectives. Being aware of the best practices, policies, and protocols for this type of organizational change as well as optimal training options for these types of counselors can help build new models for transformative spaces and relationships. This is important as more hotlines and agencies start increasing access and support, including new digital technology like text and chat.

## Conclusion

Based on these findings, the counselors discussed ways they counterbalanced professional and personal adversity and stress, with purpose and deep personal satisfaction developed by helping and witnessing resilience. This confirms the established VR technique of witnessing struggle and strength into a dynamic, reciprocal healing exchange. This study also confirms that the construct of VR is a transformative lens of care for a trauma worker that can support the retention of counselors in the helping field. The data also highlight the importance of bringing awareness and its positive effects to organizations and agencies responsible for leading and guiding helping professionals. Time and space for self-care should not fall solely on the individual and a healthy trauma-informed work environment should prioritize self-care and foster community. Building with encouragement, culture building, healing spaces, and using a trauma-informed framework is crucial in this type of work.

Therefore, being aware of the best practices, policies, and protocols for this type of organizational change as well as optimal training options for these types of counselors can help build new models for transformative spaces and relationships. This is important as more hotlines and agencies start increasing access and support, including new digital technology like text and chat.

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