

SUICIDE CRISIS LINE

working a four-hour shift on the

Most people aren't cut out to work on L.A.'s Suicide Prevention Center 24-hour crisis line. It's nothing to be ashamed of because it's a tough job. If it isn't performed sensitively and discreetly, a desperate caller may kill himself. The topper is that you're not even paid for your hard work. The dedicated people who answer the phones are volunteers.

These disturbing realities deter most people from even considering working on the crisis line. But it never stopped Mary Gayman, 61, who works two four-hour shifts every week. Most volunteers work one shift a week and typically do it for a year because it's an emotionally draining experience. Gayman has put in 17 years and quitting doesn't seem to be on the horizon.

Why does she do it and how does she endure the pressure, tension and awesome responsibility accompanying trying to dissuade someone from taking his own life? You're going to find out in this exclusive JOBS Magazine special feature.

Facts about callers

Typically, the majority of callers are women. Eight out of every 10 people who kill themselves give definite clues as a cry for help. Few commit suicide without first letting someone know how they feel. Statistically, more women try to kill themselves, yet men actually do the deed. Over the past few years, Gayman observes that she's getting a high percentage of calls from young people as young as 9 and 10 and older people in their 70s and 80s. The average call is 20 minutes, but calls often run three and four hours. "If someone on the other end is sitting there with a loaded gun, I'll talk to this person all night," says Gayman.

Callers are begging for help

Friday nights, 6:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m., volunteers are busy fielding calls from people who were out drinking or partying. From 2 a.m. to 4 a.m., there are fewer calls, yet they're high-risk callers more likely to take their own lives.

Time changes affect call volume as well. "When the days get shorter and it gets dark earlier, we get more calls," says Gayman. Predictably, pre-holidays (Christmas and New Year), call volume also increases.

Irrespective of time or season, callers contemplating suicide "want to get out of their pain," says Gayman. "Yet most of them aren't holding a loaded gun or a handful of sleeping pills. Typically, they don't have a plan. They just want someone to listen to them."

Most of the time, Gayman just listens. "Often 30 minutes passes and I'll say very little," she says. "Yet at the

end of the call, the caller is so appreciative because I listened attentively. All he wanted was to be heard."

Long history of volunteering

Gayman has a long history of volunteering. She is not unlike most of the volunteers on the crisis line who come from all walks of life and age groups. She has a family and holds down a full-time job as an office manager in a L.A. accounting firm.

But Gayman and her crisis team members are also typical volunteers, because of the enormous responsibility they carry and the commitment they're required to make. Volunteers must commit to 60 hours of training and one year of service which amounts to one four-hour shift a week.

No prior qualifications are required. All you have to bring is an open mind, a non-judgmental, compassionate and caring attitude and a willingness to learn. Bilingual Spanish/English speakers, fully fluent in both languages, are especially welcome.

The payoff:

Putting life in perspective

Gayman says that working on the suicide crisis line puts her life in perspective. She may walk into the Center rattled after a bad day at work, but when she finishes her shift, she sees the world differently. "The people who call me are thinking about killing themselves," she says. "My problems pale in comparison."

Gayman says that her 17 years on the crisis line have taught her priceless life and career lessons. "I've learned how to react quickly so I can handle any kind of emergency. I can talk to anyone on the phone. Most importantly, I've learned how to listen, an ability most people never master."

The payoff? At the end of a shift, Gayman is physically and emotionally wiped out. "But I leave knowing that I've helped people," she says. "That feeling is hard to describe."

But it keeps her coming back week after week.

"When I finish my shift, I always see the world differently. My problems pale in comparison."

For more information

If you're interested in volunteering, visit www.suicidepreventioncenter.org and contact the training coordinator at (310) 751-5330

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