Episode 216- Dr. Ande Nesmith: Text-Based Crisis Intervention Counsling: A Promising Venue to Reach Underserved Young Clients

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo. In 1901 tragedy struck Buffalo and the world When President William McKinley was assassinated at the Panamerican exposition. Soon Vice President Theodore Roosevelt came to Buffalo's Willcocks mansion to take the oath of office as the nation's new president. Currently the fully restored National Park Service site on Delaware Avenue chronicles the circumstances that tested the nation and its Constitution. Roosevelt would go on to become one of the most influential leaders the nation has known. Tour the historic site and the story of this important period in American history. I'm Peter Sobota. Listeners who have teenage or young adult children have long realized that calling them on the phone may not evoke a response from your child but shoot them a text and that might be a different story. In this episode our guest Dr. Ande Nesmith takes the path of least resistance and potential access by utilizing tech space crisis intervention counseling to reach and assist younger clients. Our guest describes her program her research and what she's learned about the differences between in person and text based counseling formats. Along the way, Dr. Nesmith addresses questions like do people behave differently when communicating digitally versus in person? Where do counselors who do this work actually do it? And why social workers would be wise to overcome our typical resistance to technology and young person's communication and social preferences and meet them where they are. Ande Nesmith Ph.D. LISW. is associate professor at the School of Social Work at the University of St. Thomas. She was interviewed in March of 2017 by the incomparable Charles Syms clinical associate professor here at the Eubie School of Social Work.

[00:02:36] Dr. Nesmith welcome to inSocialWork.

[00:02:38] Thank you.

[00:02:39] I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about what is text based crisis counseling.

[00:02:45] It is a crisis intervention hotline essentially in which the users communicate using texting rather than voice.

[00:02:52] OK. So we've had voice based hotlines for a number of years. I used to work on one back in my early years in the field. Why do you think what's driving the need today for tech space crisis counseling?

[00:03:07] Well first of all it's an interface. Texting is an interface that's appealing to young people because that's really their currently their primary mode of communication right now. Pew Research has done some has been tracking the use of various internet and electronic communications among young people for quite a while and they find that 88 percent of teens use texting to connect with their friends. It's probably more than that now that's actually a couple years old. And interestingly actually the Gallup poll found that texting is the most common form of communication among Americans through age 50. So it is even those of us who didn't grow up with it are starting to see value in it. But what's particularly important among young people is that the most chronic prevalent condition found in pediatric health care are mental health disorders and untreated mood disorders like depression directly related to suicidal behavior which in turn is the third leading cause of death among young people aged 10 to 24. Couple that with the fact that young people are really hesitant

and ambivalent about seeking help. And they tend to not want to they actually there's evidence to suggest that they would go without help rather than have to talk to somebody in person. So text counseling fills that gap.

[00:04:21] I see. Is it harder to make a connection with a texter than someone by voice do you think?

[00:04:30] I would say from my observations that it's different. So as part of my research I've looked at transcripts from text counseling sessions as well as interviewed counselors who have used both voice and text and what I've gleaned from both of those things is that on the one hand it's a criticism that we hear repeatedly from people who don't have a lot of experience with using it for any kind of therapy or intervention. But in fact you can but it has to be much more direct much more explicit because you really only have the written word. You don't have a tone of voice you don't have the verbal cues like you got a lot less to work with.

[00:05:05] OK so it sounds like that a person who was going to be text based crisis counselor might need some different kinds of training in order to be effective or be efficient at this.

[00:05:17] They do. And you know one of the interesting advantages of text counseling is actually for supervision it's easier than with voice space because with voice space you often will have you'll be training somebody and they might talk through their memory of what happened in a session where as with text counseling you can have a supervisor sitting right next to somebody in training and talk them through you can even you have that extra lag time to say OK look at that how about you type this and can guide them through that process. Let me just add one more thing what happens with a new person. At least this is what the counselors have told me is that they have a tendency to want to attach emphasis to certain words. I think we all do that to some degree and we read e-mail or texting but they really have to be trained out of that because without that emphasis we can't make that assumption unless it's explicitly stated or else there's the risk of misunderstanding something that someone is trying to convey.

[00:06:12] OK. So I'm thinking about all of this. What do you think or what would you say would be beyond the fact that most kids are today particularly kids today use text as a primary or major form mode of communication. What do you think would be the biggest advantages to using text as opposed to voice work?

[00:06:34] I would say first of all the number one advantage is they're getting help versus not getting help. They're reaching out in a way that they might not otherwise seek help. But there's a lot of other advantages that are some of them that we might not have thought about immediately on the surface. But one of them is they can get help they can seek help No matter where they are. And in fact when I was looking through these text transcripts they are texting you from the school cafeteria from work while their parents are in a room in the bathroom wherever they are in that moment of crisis. They can reach out for help. But another really big area that this is not well researched this is just something that was raised by counselors that I talked to. So I just want to add that caveat but I think it's really worth looking into more is this ability to potentially share more about what's going on. First of all faster but also if a young person is being mistreated by someone then it's easier for them to name that person to report them than it is when they have to actually say their name or look somebody in the eye.

[00:07:37] Makes absolute sense to me. Can we flip it around. So we've talked about some of the big advantages. What would you think are some of the biggest challenges to using a text based format.

[00:07:48] The challenges are in the, So there's both the piece that I already talked about where you have to be careful how you interpret something that somebody says the counselor also has a challenge in how they convey empathy. So they have to be very direct with their empathy. They can't use tone of voice. They can't use silence necessarily in the same way. So one of the things that I observe from when I was looking at these sessions is that unlike a voice session where somebody might start with a statement and then a counsellor can say mmhmm and then the caller will continue, the texter will often begin with three to five words. I'm lost. I feel like I died. I really hate my life. And then they will say nothing else. And then the counselor has to ask them a question and wait and then they'll get another response and then they have to wait for us to slowly pull it out of them. One question at a time.

[00:08:43] So the counselor has to learn how to like for lack of a better term sit on her hands and kind of wait for that response rather than looking at somebody knowing that they may be thinking or whatever it takes a little bit different skill or experience to be able to just sit there and wait patiently for that person to respond.

[00:09:03] That's you know that's a really good description. There's this patience that's really important because the other thing that can happen. I saw it happen a little bit but mostly the counselors have learned not to do this. And so they talked to me a little bit about how they had to train new people to ask a single question at a time because what happens is you can get off sequence. And anybody who's texted knows that this can happen anyway. If you have two questions and one you may not know which one they're responding to or if you ask a second question before first one has been answered. Then suddenly your conversation is no longer, It's just no longer following a normal sequence. So they literally so sitting on your hands is a good description. They have to ask a question wait for that answer ask a second single question. Wait for that answer. It takes longer.

[00:09:49] Yes. We try to do the same things with new social work students and learning how to interview that. You kind of have to learn how not to do some of the things that you've been used to doing for your entire life.

[00:10:00] Right. Yeah. Not the same as casual conversation. You have to do it. It's much more thoughtful and has to be done in a really purposeful way.

[00:10:09] Yes. So I know you've mentioned a couple of different times studies and research and I get the sense that you've been doing some research in this area I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about your research or any studies that you have done that has looked at this particular issue.

[00:10:25] Yeah. So let me first say that I had a student I had not heard of text counseling and one of my graduate students had a field placement where she had done this a few years ago where she did a small assignment for a class on it. And it really intrigued me. I started talking to other social service providers other social workers about text based counseling after reading my students work and I found that people I'll say about over 35 or so those who hadn't grown up with texting were really skeptical. And part of what they were skeptical of is they just didn't see that you could make a connection. And I thought you know before we assume that that's true I would love to actually find this out. And so I worked with a local program that only had a voice based hotline and started a text one because they found that only four percent of their callers fit this younger demographic but they knew that the younger demographic needed help. So they started up in 2011 a text based counseling program. And it's really I mean in the first year it increased the number of text sessions that were initiated increased six fold. So what I was looking at was I wanted to find out in what ways young people use text crisis services to communicate their needs to figure out if they gave any sort of

indicators of whether or not those needs were addressed how the counselors responded to those needs and what approaches were most useful or just about the communication style what was unique to texting relative to voice.

[00:11:50] And what did you learn? I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that about what you learned and what some of your takeaways from that research was.

[00:11:59] So when I did in this particular study was I randomly selected four text counseling sessions per month over the course of a year. I wanted to make sure I got at least some from every month because the kinds of problems that arise are different especially for young people summer when school is not in session. Different problems arise. Holiday seasons. So 48 text transcripts and they interviewed counseling supervisors who had experience with both and saw things that I learned. So first of all that it is a slower process. However that the people who are texting you even though they might start with a vague statement they do get down to business pretty quickly. I found that they are multitasking all the time. Sometimes they're even accidentally writing something to the counselor that was meant for either somebody else on a different tech session or they might be distracted because they're doing something else and there will be they will disappear for a while and you'll find out is because class started or somebody walked in that room. You know it's funny you mention that was something that I also think can evolve with but it takes about six times as long for the same amount of content. So what would normally be a 10 minute conversation over voice takes about an hour. But the other interesting thing is that there does seem to be this ability to share information quickly that's really deeply personal. And as I started looking into it I was trying to find something that would explain it. And I found some older research that refers to this online disinhibition effect and it was an attempt to explain behavior where that we've probably all seen to some degree where people behave differently online than they might in person. You think about the comment sections that you see at the end of a news article or an opinion piece and how quickly they devolve and some of these people would not behave that way in person so they might behave more candidly and more positively or more negatively or aggressively. And what I learned is that part of it is that the texter has control over more the information especially about the effect it gives them a sense of safety and asynchronicity asynchronicity of it where you can delay you can kind of wait and think about how you want to respond. Allows also a little bit of safety and control of that situation.

[00:14:17] OK. Did they find that the outcomes from the sessions and the work they were doing with the texter, did you find it to be as effective as say voice based counseling or crisis counseling?

[00:14:33] Yeah. And therein lies the problem with anonymous services. This is really a tough one. Whether it's voice or texting is that if you're promising anonymity which is what these hotlines do you don't know what the outcome is beyond the end of that call. You can't. There have been some attempts to try to reach people afterward but there's always the risk the bias the people you reach are more likely to be doing well. For example I mean to use the most extreme example if it's a suicide hotline and someone is suicidal and they completed suicide you are not going to find that out. They are not going to be reachable. So what I was searching for was were there indicators within the tech session were there hints and what I found is about two thirds of them did give indicators that they were getting something positive out of it. They would say I feel much better thank you so much it's such a relief to talk to someone but just like with the counselors have to be cautious somebody who doesn't say that doesn't mean it wasn't helpful. There's always that gap of information. So this is a tough one to figure out but there's so little research right now on it that I'm hesitant to say that we really know for sure.

[00:15:45] I'm really intrigued by this. I don't know if they do it in our community. We have a crisis center and it's been around for... I started there back in the 70s and it was been there 15 years before

I even started. And I don't know if they do text.

[00:16:02] Well you know it's interesting so I did. You know as for many social work types you know I did my first my very first sort of counseling kind of thing with crisis hotline. Definitely voice based. And this is really it is a I think it really has some promise to it. I think it has some it potentially has some traction. It also has some problems. I mean the whole piece of my research that I didn't get into here was how to end the session. They tend to just sort of fade away and not respond that doesn't happen in voice. They actually have an end and some closure so there's a lot of things to sort of sort out. But if we're going to keep up with the times I think we have to pay attention.

[00:16:40] Are you looking to do more research in this in this particular area?

[00:16:44] Oh yes absolutely. In fact when I was looking to see what other First of all I was looking to see how many text lines there were in the United States and there isn't any sort of place to find that out. There's a very well-known big national hotline the crisis text line that's out there and they collect data on their own calls. And a lot of you know sort of spotted in their different youth programs or shelters will have them just locally but there isn't a good way to find out first of all what's out there. And in terms of published empirical research I did a comprehensive research exploration of what is published and I could find three studies, two of which were not in the United States one of which was used a chat room which is actually different than texting because you don't necessarily have that in your pocket with you in the classroom or in wherever you're out at the moment. There's just not much out there right now.

[00:17:41] You mentioned that there are those hard to get a sense of how many programs do have chat or these kind of text based intervention programs. Does the person who's the counselor on duty I guess. Do they like sit in an office someplace and wait and respond or can they. Or did you find it the people kind of moved around and they're on call and that if something came up that they would stop what they were doing and address that particular situation?

[00:18:08] The more well funded and bigger programs have a specific space. So the organization that I worked with, Text for Life, they have a space and it's a quiet space where the counselors come in they do a shift. They've got the computers the supervisors are there on hand to help whether it's voice or text. However I have talked to people in other smaller especially if it's a more rural organization where they don't have that kind of facility and they have somebody where it's kind of like having you know the old fashioned pager where they have just agreed to be on call and they're using a cell phone often a work based one. But they're doing it from wherever they are. So right now it kind of depends on how big of a program it is where they're located and what kind of funding they have.

[00:18:51] OK I'm kind of moved away from a research question for a second because it's just that one just came to my mind. But I think getting back to your research question where would you like to take your research next do you think?

[00:19:02] I would love to, At the time I thought the 48 text Sessions was a lot and now I'm thinking of there's there's so much more that I would like to know. First of all I would like I did some time analysis looking at lag time and how long it takes to do a session and how you handle lag times but I would love to get a bigger sample to really break into how the sessions unfold. At what point if a person reveals something new so they might start out saying I'm depressed and then at some point they'll say my father is sexually abusing me you know what triggers them releasing more information. When does that happen in a session. And I think I need a bigger sample to do that. I would also like to make sure if it's possible to get a wider age range and a broader location.

So this one was mostly the state of Minnesota. But I think it would be helpful to get a more national sample.

[00:19:56] Ok I was also wondering. So somebody calls in or texts in and the crisis may be resolved but they may need something more long term. Is there a way to help that person move in that direction or are there text based interventions that can be for someone who might be reticent about making another kind of connection?

[00:20:19] I think that's a really important question and I think that's where we're lacking right now. There are a lot of people doing some really creative stuff with what we sometimes call telemedicine or e-medicine. There's online groups and there's chat rooms but it's not consistent. There's not necessarily anything accessible to any particular person depending on where they live and in terms of and especially not for the longer term. I've heard of a few of them I actually had a conference last fall. I got to hear about a pilot program that was trying to do longer term counseling through e-mail. But what I observed in the transcripts was that there was still this deep hesitation even after the caller, the texter was able to share some information about then shifting to somebody in real life. Ideally at some point they would be able to get longer term help because many of the people who are calling and don't have problems that are easily resolved in the moment you know the purpose of crisis intervention counseling is to provide safety and get them through the moment and then hopefully connect them to something longer term it's never was intended for the final solution. But right now it's kind of limited. I do think that we're moving in that direction that we may see more opportunities especially as we see more young people reaching out to crisis intervention and text space that we might see something that's electronic maybe not text. It might be something different but where they don't have to come in and see somebody in person that where they can use have that safety for them of having some of that privacy in a synchronicity that I was talking about earlier.

[00:21:50] I see your point. We're coming to an end this has been a fascinating conversation because I don't think a lot of people have thought a lot about text based intervention particularly in a crisis state. Most of us are used to some idea of you know a person on a phone and being able to talk to them. You get a sense of as you talked a little bit earlier about emotionality and you can display that kind of empathetic connection. So I wonder if you had any thoughts about what we should be thinking about next with text based interventions are where do you think we should go moving forward with this kind of intervention?

[00:22:26] That's a great question. First of all I think it's accessibility particularly being able to get the message out that there are these texting options there is a national texting line that young people can use from anywhere whether or not they all know about it is not so clear. But in rural areas where for youth not only are there not the same kinds of services available but the likelihood that they're going to personally know the people that they're seeking help from which could inhibit them even further. That's really high when you're in a small area. So being able to serve some of these young people who can't go into you can't walk into a service and hope that maybe people won't already know them or that they don't even exist because they live in too rural of an area. I think reaching out for those young people is really really important. Getting the message out. I'm so glad that we have this one big national line. And I will say that Text for Life the program that I looked at is national but it's not advertised nationally unless that's changed really recently the funding comes from Minnesota. Having more than one option I think is also would be really helpful especially as it's ramping up the use of it is ramping up.

[00:23:32] I've actually heard of it but I don't hear about it much but I'm wondering if it's already out there with people who text that they already know that it exists. Even though some of us older practitioners might not quite might not know that.

[00:23:49] They might and I think getting it from all angles practitioners often need to know about these resources as much as the potential users do. I know that the program that I worked with has extensively been trying to reach out to make sure that the message goes up and go into high schools and they talk to the young people and they've particularly been trying to reach out to tribal nations and make sure that Native American youth are aware of it and have access to it as well and feel like the people on the other end are going to be culturally sensitive I guess I would say that's the other thing as well. We you know be able to have texting options and other languages than English being able to. I would say just about any social service right. Being able to have that really reaching a wide range of people means having culturally competent counselors and also having and accessible in different languages.

[00:24:37] Absolutely. Absolutely. I'm wondering if you have any closing thoughts as we move to the end concerning either the work you've done or you're thinking about text based crisis intervention going forward or where it is now. I'm just wondering about if you have any thoughts.

[00:24:53] Yeah I mean first of all I would say that the early signs seem to be that this is really popular among young people. There is a growing number of youth who at least say describe themselves as having social anxiety. I'm not talking about this as being a clinical diagnosis but that is when I talked to school counselors or other people who have contact with young people they say that these people are describing it that way any kind of way to have an asynchronous conversation or something that's in between that stands between them and the other person can really be a big relief to them. So finding a way to reach out is really important. I would say that I would be cautious to not be too critical of the way that young people communicate. I have heard so many times texting is an addiction and you know kids are addicted to this or it's bad for them. Well there's a person on the other end of that line. It's not that they're addicted to the telephone. There's a human being that they're communicating with. And that's what adolescents do. They're connecting with their peers and their friends and they communicate they are just using a different venue a different interface than you know many of us used when we were younger and finding a way to recognize the positive in that that it doesn't mean that they're necessarily isolated it means their connections are different from a generation ago. So yeah I mean it's the other thing that I would say that I think is really important. I already said this earlier but I just really want to emphasize it is the question should not really be is this as good as voice counseling or as good as in person but it's better than nothing Given that so many young people would choose to just sit with their pain. If we are at least reaching and making some sort of connection then helping that's a huge improvement over them sitting with it and not getting any help.

[00:26:40] I absolutely agree and I really thank you for coming on line with us and spending some time was talking not only about your research but about this kind of growing area of practice for social work and hopefully we'll talk again at some point time as your research moves forward and we learn more and more about text based counseling.

[00:26:59] All right well thank you so much. Thank you. Have a good day.

[00:27:03] You've been listening to Dr. Ande Nesmith discuss tech space crisis intervention counseling and social work.

[00:27:19] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.