

# French Red Cross *Croix-Rouge Écoute* psychological support activity

## Contact information

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## Background/history

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In the French Red Cross (FRC), psychological support is defined as the means and attitudes that enable volunteers to assist people with psychological difficulties before referring them, if necessary, for more specialized medical care.

Psychological support is to mental health what first aid is to physical health. It should, however, be an integral part of all Red Cross activities and aid operations.

For more than 12 years, the French Red Cross has been implementing the *Croix-Rouge Écoute* (“Red Cross Listens”) psychological support programme which applies especially to people with psychological difficulties.

In October 1986, the minister of health organized a national drug-prevention campaign. He asked the French Red Cross to study and introduce a free telephone number that young people could call for advice and information. This was the first time that a toll-free number had been used in France for the public at large. In January 1987, the ministry of health assessed the operation; results showed that a great many calls had been received from young people. They had asked questions not only about drugs, but also about how they wanted to feel supported, listened to and recognized.

In March 1988, the FRC set up a toll-free, nationwide telephone service that people could call to talk anonymously about their difficulties. The service was particularly aimed at preventing troubled relations between parents and children before they arise. The lines were to be operated by volunteers, trained and supported by salaried psychiatrists and psychologists.

## Objectives

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- To set up a free, non-specialist telephone service. Callers are guaranteed anonymity and an attentive listener with whom they can talk about their distress, whether family

conflicts, dependency, loneliness, violence or any other problems.

- To train volunteers to become sympathetic listeners, who are more interested in people than in their symptoms.

## Brief description of activities

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The FRC's activities aim to prevent social exclusion in whatever form and the work of *Croix-Rouge Écoute* is consistent with this approach. It is also an integral part of the FRC's health promotion activities.

Although the volunteers are trained in psychological issues, they are not necessarily specialists in, for example, mental health or drug addiction, so the emphasis is on active listening to whatever the caller has to say. It is so much easier to talk about problems and difficulties to an anonymous interlocutor on the telephone, out of sight. Anonymity between the caller and the listener is guaranteed, no matter what kind of problem is discussed. The dialogue may be developed in a single or in several calls.

## Major elements of the programme

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The national *Croix-Rouge Écoute* service today comprises a team of some 40 volunteer listeners and staff or volunteer mental health professionals. Each listener receives initial training of about 150 hours and on-the-job training. Volunteers and professionals work as a team and everyone is bound by professional secrecy.

By active listening, guaranteeing neutrality, anonymity and confidentiality, it is possible to break through isolation by renewing dialogue, to persuade callers to say the words that relieve tensions and to help them find comfort. Putting problems into words enables people to distance themselves from the situation and helps them to find individualized "solutions". Whatever is said, whether aggressive, manipulative, a joke or an insult, is regarded by *Croix-Rouge Écoute* as an attempt to communicate by a person who is excluded in some way or another.

There is an ever-increasing demand for more help and *Croix-Rouge Écoute* works in partnership with the other social institutions and help line services to create new networks.

From the outset, the service has kept statistics on the number of calls, the subjects and difficulties mentioned, and the characteristics of callers (age, sex, socio-professional status, geographical origin, etc). It has also assessed the public's awareness of the service.

In 1999, *Croix-Rouge Écoute* received almost 20,000 calls. It has doubled the number of calls since 1995 and increased them tenfold in ten years. Silent or brief calls account for about 20 per cent of the total, but are usually less than the number registered by other listening services. Young people under the age of 18 make some 9 per cent of the callers. The remainder is divided about equally between men and women. More than a third of calls come from callers for whom a single conversation is not enough. Most callers are unemployed.

The service targets in particular parent-child relationships. Calls from young people have at times accounted for up to 80 per cent of the total. Between 1995 and 1997, the proportion of calls concerning difficulties with relationships (especially within the family), including

various forms of violence, was relatively constant. Under-18s called mainly to talk about difficulties in their relationships with parents, friends, etc., love-life problems and sexuality. This was also a constant theme for those under 13, who usually raised sexual and emotional matters in the form of jokes, games, etc.

Since 1996, so-called “psychological or psychiatric” calls have increased, especially repeated calls from people being treated for depression or various psychiatric conditions. Unemployment, uncertainty and exclusion are increasingly present in today’s environment. *Croix-Rouge Écoute* can direct callers to competent social and medical services, but very often the callers are already in their care. Despite this, their suffering is too great and/or insufficiently recognized. Talking to someone anonymously can help them to reduce their anxiety level, to understand the situation better and to learn to live with their difficulties.

The increase in repeated calls of a psychiatric nature and from sexual deviants also corresponds to the changes in the treatment of these kinds of illness and the way the psychiatric hospital system has developed. Many people who were formerly hospitalized are now being treated as outpatients, and continue to live in, or on the edge of, society. Health professionals treat them, but they often complain of the inadequacy or lack of continuity of the care they are given. Despite the progress achieved through various psychotropic drugs, these patients are often in a state of anxiety or great mental suffering. Occasionally, *Croix-Rouge Écoute* will draw up individual strategies for some callers.

To provide a quality service, volunteer listeners need specific back-up and training. They are guided and supported by mental health professionals. They also run the initial training which every volunteer receives. The training consists of:

- basic active listening training (about 150 hours);
- focus group meetings. Focus groups are made up of five to eight volunteers and a trainer, who discusses certain calls in greater detail and helps volunteers learn to cope with the effect some calls may have on them personally;
- simulated call exercises; and
- team meetings.

Teamwork is extremely important and, after initial training, volunteers continue to work with a team. In the *Croix-Rouge Écoute* programme, teamwork is based on:

- the principle of shared calls through dual listening;
- absolute professional secrecy;
- participation in focus group meetings to study particular cases;
- supervision of volunteers; and
- participation in team meetings.

## Partnerships and alliances

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The FRC funds *Croix-Rouge Écoute* from its own resources. The society has signed a number of agreements with state authorities and assists in humanitarian activities. Partners include the Ministry of Social Affairs (Department of Social Activities), the Ministry of Justice (Department of Prison Administration), prefectures, associations such as the National Union of Family Associations, *Association Astrée* and institutions such as the Mont-Blanc Motorways and Tunnel Company.

*Croix-Rouge Écoute* cooperates with other departments within the French Red Cross, such as the youth delegation (health education programmes), relief and emergencies delegation (psychological support action and training programmes), department of communication and partnership, department of international operations (projects to help in the establishment of telephone help line services in sister societies).

## Monitoring and evaluation

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For four years, *Croix-Rouge Écoute* participants have met in an annual one-day seminar to discuss their work with the aid of outside contributors. This also enables the service to develop its practices.

In 1998 a comparative study of the various social telephone services receiving state subsidies was undertaken. Although it is not subsidized, *Croix-Rouge Écoute* was included in the study. *Croix-Rouge Écoute* was praised in the report for being non-specialized and for its contribution to the overall care and prevention system.

## The future

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A help line for prisoners, an experimental pilot project, was launched in 1999. By targeting prisoners, *Croix-Rouge Écoute* will be able to help people who are especially isolated and excluded from society, and whose family and social ties are broken. The project also aims at preventing suicides in detention, reducing conflict and violence and encouraging rehabilitation of prisoners. A team of 12 experienced volunteers were trained for this project.

In disaster response operations, *Croix-Rouge Écoute* now works in association with the FRC's national emergency and relief department. It has also helped other institutions in disaster situations. *Croix-Rouge Écoute* listeners were particularly active after the fire in the Mont-Blanc tunnel (April 1999) and after storms and floods hit France in December 1999 and January 2000.

The programme also helps FRC local, departmental or regional units establish help lines and has received a number of requests from other institutions. The FRC's governing board has outlined a policy to increase the capacity of *Croix-Rouge Écoute* to train volunteers and set up new help lines, at the same time ensuring that the training and service remain uniform throughout the country.

## Lessons learned

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- The use of trained volunteers is the greatest strength of *Croix-Rouge Écoute*. The programme has proved that psychological support is not a matter for specialists only. A good listener can go a long way to help those in distress. Another reason for the success of the programme is the total anonymity of the telephone.
- Thanks to a nationwide, toll-free number, a *Croix-Rouge Écoute* listener is always nearby no matter where a person calls from. A non-specialist, the listener could be a sympathetic neighbour, someone with whom it is easy to talk.
- In modern society in the developed world, social bonds are becoming weaker. The distressed and the excluded very often have no family or friends to turn to for help. But,

more than ever, they need someone to listen to them, to help them to understand what is happening to them and to find their own solutions.

- The successes of psychological support services are rarely visible. But they are always there, ready to reach out and help anyone who is in need of assistance.