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Crisis Lines Answering the Call: Crisis Line Awareness Week and Covid-19

Interior, BC – Every 20 minutes, someone in the Interior is reminded that they matter. Just by calling the Interior Crisis Line Network. And with COVID-19 concerns, the volume is only increasing.

This year Crisis Line Awareness Week, March 23-27, arrives during the global response to the coronavirus which only amplifies the importance of crisis lines for people in the Interior.

“We thought we would be celebrating our record number of calls last year with over 23,000 support contacts and 300,000 minutes of support. Instead we are ramping up with ‘all hands on deck’ to support the influx of concerns” explains Asha Croggon, Program Director for the service.

The Interior Crisis Line provides evidence-based crisis de-escalation, short-term emotional support, suicide prevention and intervention to people across the Interior Region. And calls are increasing. “People are impacted with the unknowns around COVID-19 such as the stress of being quarantined. Plus the other issues in life that prompt someone to call the crisis line don’t go away when there is a global health crisis and may even become worse because of it,” says Heather Silvester, manager of the Williams Lake site.

Anxiety is running high and concern is understandable. The Interior Crisis Line Network is working to keep their people safe and healthy while answering the growing number of requests for support on both their phone line (1.888.353.CARE) and their chat service (Thursday to Sunday 5-9pmPT).

“The good news is people are reaching out for support as their community services are closing and our people are answering all the calls they can. We estimate 40% of our calls over the last week alone were coronavirus-related.” Sheila Dudek, coordinator of the Trail site.

Fortunately for the Interior Crisis Line, volunteers and staff are still coming forward for shifts. The people who work and volunteer with the Interior Crisis Line Network come from local communities like Cranbrook, Kelowna, Trail, Vernon and Williams Lake. “Their commitment and care for the people of this entire region is a real source of hope during uncertain times,” Natalie Hake, manager with the Cranbrook site, continues.

Another strength working for the Interior Crisis Line Network is rather than having one central location which could be negatively impacted, it is built on a network of partner agencies (CMHA branches in Cranbrook, Vernon and Williams Lake, along with Kelowna Community Resources and Trail FAIR Society).

The Interior Crisis Line is looking into other innovative options to keep the lines open as the volume increases and staff and volunteers are impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. "Support from the community so far has been wonderful" shares Michelle Nelmes, coordinator for the Kelowna site. "We've had people calling to see if they can help out on the lines which reflects the heart of the communities we serve."

Crisis Line Responders complete a full screening and 40+ hours of training and mentoring before supporting people, so though the general public can't help out directly on the lines, there are other ways they can support the service.

One of those is in being patient if they can't get through right away or if contacts are a bit shorter. Like other service providers, the Interior Crisis Line is being impacted by call volume and telecommunication issues as more people are online. They are asking people to be patient. If it's not an emergency when they can't get through, pause and try again. If it is an emergency, reach out directly to 911.

Another way the community can help out is by reaching out to one another. Social distancing doesn't mean isolation. A quick chat with someone who you think may be struggling with the situation or is quarantined, can make all the difference. Alyssa Christmas, manager of the Vernon site, explains "We've all experienced the power of really being heard by someone who isn't trying to fix us, is willing to listen, ask questions and remind us that, for the most part, we know the answers."

Reaching out to be a support to others can help us too. It can release hormones that are calming and cultivate a sense of meaning and connection in our lives. Investing in consistent self-care is also critical. Some suggestions include taking a media break (including social) or committing to get information from recognized sources only. Incorporating acts of gratitude, like sharing your gratitudes with a friend or in a journal, can make a surprising difference in shifting perspectives and improving your immune system. Science shows there is a shift in our stress response and brain functioning when we engage in gratitude or do things we enjoy. If you can't do the activity you love, daydreaming about it for even three minutes can shift things.

Collaboratively working through safety plans and self-care plans is part of what crisis line responders do. "We are so grateful for all the crisis line responders who are able to come in and provide support and for those who are cheering us on. Perhaps we are still celebrating this Crisis Line Awareness week, just not in the way we imagined. The level of commitment within the community of crisis line responders is extraordinary and really speaks to the power of care in the Interior Region as a whole," closes Asha Croggon.

It seems there are many reasons why the last four digits in the Interior Crisis Line number spell 'C.A.R.E.'.

Interior Crisis Line Network can be reached by phone at 1.888.353.2273(CARE), 24/7/365 or by chat at interiorcrisisline.com (Thursday to Sunday 5-9pmPT). It is a network made up of the five local crisis lines in the Interior Region and is funded by the Interior Health Authority. Interested in volunteering, go to interiorcrisisline.com or call 1.250.398.8220, ext 2031 or 2032.

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