

# Specifics and Operational Procedures of the Psychological Assistance Hotline during the COVID-19 Pandemic in China

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**Abstract:** Psychological hotlines became the most convenient and feasible way to provide psychological intervention for the needy after the outbreak of COVID-19. Hotlines assisting in defeating the coronavirus functioned quite differently from general psychological hotlines and face-to-face counseling. This article discusses the specificity of hotlines of this kind, including appropriate operational procedures that include the overall assessment and the empathetic understanding of the clients, a quick focus on goals, and real-world oriented assistance. Major administrative and ethical concerns are also addressed.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic; psychological assistance hotlines; operational procedure; ethics

## 1 Introduction

With the shift of the COVID-19 outbreak from epidemic to the pandemic, it has become a public health emergency internationally. Due to the high contagiousness of the COVID-19, all psychological interventions were carried out remotely, either by telephone hotline or online service. The psychological hotline is a convenient and practical way for psychological counseling, crisis intervention, and mental health education [1]. From the outset, the psychological hotline was closely related to emergency psychological treatment [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) pointed out that in the case of suicide prevention, it could not be effective without multi-disciplinary collaboration, including hotlines [3]. Psychological hotlines can offer effective mental health services for individuals under crisis [4].

Shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19, the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China (NHC) launched specific guidelines for crisis intervention and psychological assistance [5]. It also released a memo outlining the set-up of psychological assistance hotlines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each service provider should have at least 2 lines and offer  $24 \times 7$  service free of charge on the basis of the general guidelines for hotlines nationwide [6]. The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE) has also urged educational institutions to provide psychological support and counseling via hotlines and network for people in need during the COVID-19 outbreak [7]. Nearly one thousand hotlines were established during coronavirus outbreak in response to the call from the government and the academic community [8].

During the SARS epidemic, the hotline was the main method of mental health assistance [9]. Providing psychological intervention to a stressed public via hotline in a scientific and consistent manner is a difficult challenge for clinical psychologists. As all face-to-face psychological services were suspended at the beginning of the outbreak, psychologists can only provide psychological assistance through hotlines or the Internet. As a result, the hotline has assumed the function of general offline counseling and psychological first aid.



The authors published *Guidelines for Psychological Hotlines During the Fight against Coronavirus* on January 31st based on their experience with psychological hotlines [10], and have been engaged in clinical supervision of hotline staff. They also conducted research on quality evaluation measures for psychological hotlines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the experience of supervision and the management of major psychological hotlines during the epidemic, this paper has three aims: 1) to introduce the position and principles of hotlines in the context of the pandemic; 2) to clarify the procedures of psychological intervention considering the specificities of the situation; and 3) to illustrate the major administrative and ethical issues which have to be addressed to guarantee the effectiveness of such hotlines.

## **2 Goals and Principles of Psychological Assistance Hotlines during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **2.1 Goals**

The psychological assistance hotline can provide psychological support and crisis intervention to a public in pandemic-related distress. The hotline service can help to improve the emotional stability of the clients and maintain their mental health.

### **2.2 Principles**

Psychological assistance is based on the principles of standardisation, scientific practice, and ethical considerations [10].

#### **(1) Standardization**

Psychologists should practice in a manner consistent with the unified framework of national joint prevention and control mechanisms in order to be professional and effective.

#### **(2) Practicing in a scientific way**

Professionals should apply psychological methods and techniques to help identify problems, provide emotional release, psychological support, and constructive help.

#### **(3) Ethical guidelines**

Psychologists should abide by professional ethics and practice with a spirit of benevolence, responsibility, integrity, justice and respect. On the most basic level, this means to avoid harming clients and to guarantee the client's welfare to the best of their abilities.

## **3 The Specificities of Psychological Assistance Hotlines during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Hotlines in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak function quite differently from the general psychological hotlines and face-to-face counseling. Three aspects are highlighted:

### **3.1 Hotline Counselors are Professionals and Not Para-Professional Volunteers**

General psychological hotline helpers are usually para-professionals who have basic knowledge of psychology and have acquired basic counseling skills. Most clients call for help with general psychological distress [11]. Due to the impossibility of regular face-to-face counseling during the coronavirus pandemic, the hotlines have become the most important and convenient way to address the huge demand for psychological services. Therefore, professionally qualified hotline volunteers need to be recruited. At present, the professional psychologists manning the hotlines mainly include supervisors, psychologists and assistant psychologists registered with the Clinical and Counseling Psychology Registration System (CCPRS) of the Chinese Psychological Society, as well as those who previously obtained their certificates from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China [12].

### ***3.2 The Hotline Functions as Professional Psychological Counseling in the Hotline Service Setting***

The psychological hotline during the coronavirus pandemic is no longer a general psychological hotline service, but professional psychological counseling. This has a lot to do with the complexity of clients' needs caused by public health emergencies [2]. Due to the overwhelming demands for help and high turnover of counselors, the basic settings of the hotline should be consistent: each session should last about 30 minutes; the service provided should be single-session counseling, callers should be anonymous; and multi-disciplinary cooperation can be sought if needed [10].

### ***3.3 Focus on the Current Situation of the Pandemic and Emphasize Dealing with Stress Response***

Psychological hotlines of this kind differ from general psychological counseling in terms of content and ways of intervention. The psychological assistance focuses on the emotional distress and personal crises caused by the pandemic. There is a need for quick focusing. The aim is to help the clients to relieve emotional pressure, cope with real-world issues, and regain a sense of control over their lives. These situations often require clear advice and guidance for the clients rather than psychological insight.

## **4 Operational Procedures of Assistance Hotlines during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The callers of the general psychological hotlines usually go through certain stages when asking for help: such as greetings stage, questioning stage and problem description stage [13]. Combining the above considerations regarding the specificity of the pandemic psychological assistance hotline, the hotline should not only ensure that the basic service needs of the client are met, but also consider the feasibility at the actual operational level, which requires clear work procedures and focus.

### ***Step 1: listen to and assess clients holistically***

The counselors should quickly establish a connection with clients and respond to their needs with warmth. The priority is to understand the caller's situation, including why the person is calling and to assess the person's overall state of mind. The counselors should focus closely on the issues related to the pandemic, including the client's major concerns, specific real-world problems, the current situation, and available social resources. They should be sensitive to the symptoms of mental illness and suicidal ideation.

### ***Step 2: deeply and empathically understand the clients***

Building a relationship of trust is the guarantee of effectiveness of the intervention. This depends on the counselor's attitude towards and understanding of the clients. After evaluating the client's problems, the counselor needs to organize the information quickly and form a preliminary case conceptualization, which is conducive to an in-depth understanding of the client. Based on this in-depth understanding, the counselors give feedback to the clients with empathy. Active listening and empathic expression can be significant instruments for effective intervention.

### ***Step 3: focus on limited goals and be resource-oriented***

Within the framework of a time-limited, single-session setting, it is particularly important to focus on a limited set of goals based on the overall assessment. Through expressing empathic understanding, the counselors help the clients to focus on the problem, which in turn helps to restore a sense of certainty and control. It is also a practical way of dealing with problems in a short time. After focusing on the problem, the counselors can help clients form goals, find social support, and make use of the available resources.

### ***Step 4: Provide real life guidance and encourage taking action***

When the counseling goals are set up, the counselors can take appropriate approaches and techniques to intervene according to the client's emotional state and situation. The intervention includes calming and centering techniques and psychological education. Then the counselor gives guidance to the client on physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive aspects of their situation. The techniques also include encouragement and support, helping to strengthen the positive aspects of clients, and to improve their confidence. Finally, the counselors should properly conclude the session, and inform the clients to feel free to call back when needed. The counselors should make referrals if necessary.

The operational procedures of hotlines of this kind should be flexible. On some occasions, the assistance session may end earlier when the goal is achieved. It may also be stopped at the certain stage even without any progress, which requires the counselors to be flexible on a case-by-case basis.

## **5 Administrative Concerns Related to Assistance Hotlines during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### ***5.1 A Clearly Defined Organizational Structure Enables the Proper Administrative Operation of the Hotline***

A full-time director in charge of the hotline agency should be appointed. There is no doubt that the counselors and supervisors are the heart of the service provided by the hotlines, but normally they work on a shift basis and often voluntarily. However, the administrative staff work during office hours and are permanent employees. During the pandemic, most of the professionals are temporarily recruited as volunteers from every corner of the country. As a result, they may not be familiar with each other. Besides, because of the pandemic, all professionals have to work from home, which is challenging for the administrative staff in terms of scheduling and emergency response. Administrative staff are not only responsible for the scheduling of the professionals, but also responsible for documentation work and public affairs [10], which are crucial for the effective operation of the hotline.

### ***5.2 A System of Supervision Guarantees the Professional Operation of the Hotline***

Each work shift of the counselors should have at least one assigned supervisor. Group supervision should be provided immediately after work. Supervisors should be required to attend a regular group supervision meeting moderated by senior experts as well. This supervision approach has been practiced by the major hotline agencies in China and functions effectively. As chief complaints from the clients were not limited to panics triggered by the pandemic, but also by the lack of accessibilities to general mental health services including counseling, therapy, and psychiatry treatment, the counselors work become more complex. Furthermore, there is a growing number of clients from overseas, and increase in repeated calls as the pandemic became global. The clinical supervision system not only helps to solve difficult problems in psychological assistance [10], but also helps the professionals feel connected. During supervision, they can relieve their work pressure and avoid burnout, which ensures the quality of the hotline assistance.

### ***5.3 The Importance of Referral Resource for Hotline Operation***

Psychological help in during an epidemic is more complicated. Under stress, the clients are unable to distinguish the functions of various hotlines. In some cases, they call just because they cannot find the appropriate department to get their problem addressed. Therefore, the hotline should have sufficient information about other social resources, such as medical institutions, government policies, and other relevant psychological assistance organizations. Information about referral resources can promote the work of counselors.

## **6 Essential Ethics for Hotlines during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Based on the practical experience in China, counselors should practice in an anonymous, single-session, and time-limited setting, which was quite different from general psychological practice. As a result, even though it is the professionals who volunteered in the hotlines, they were faced with several ethical challenges. Psychological hotlines should follow the general principles of *the Code of Ethics for Counseling and Clinical Practice (2nd edition)*, issued by the Chinese Psychological Society [14], including benevolence, responsibility, integrity, justice, and respect, with the basic starting point of avoiding harm to clients and maintaining clients' welfare.

### ***6.1 Confidentiality and Exceptions***

Confidentiality is part of basic professional ethic. Due to the high infectivity of the COVID-19, the professionals practiced at home, which raises the issue of special requirements regarding confidentiality.

Firstly, the counselor should make sure to answer the psychological hotline in an independent and quiet space and not reveal client information to family members. Secondly, the counselors should keep the counseling records properly, file them with the affiliated institutes in time, and avoid missing files.

The exceptions include cases of identifiable risks of self-harm or suicide. If the clients are diagnosed as infected with coronavirus but have not been receiving medical treatment, the counselors should first discuss with the clients about seeking medical treatment and whether there is a possible threat to others and the public more widely. The counselors should report to the relevant government body if necessary. Breaking confidentiality because of the exceptions mentioned above does not mean that the clients' privacy is not protected. The counselors should act in the interest of the client as well as the public.

### ***6.2 Professional Competence and Responsibilities***

During the pandemic, people may seek help for various non-psychological reasons, which make the situation more complex. For example, during the early stage of the outbreak, people may call to seek for accurate diagnosis of physical problems because of their fear of being infected. There is also a need to diagnose mental disorders. Professionals should always practice within the limits of their competence.

The professional competence of hotline counselors includes basic training in psychological counseling, understanding the characteristics of telephone counseling, and being trained in specific issues and basic medical knowledge related to the coronavirus pandemic. A special focus of training should be how to deal with emotions in crisis. The psychological hotline is designed to help people in times of emergency. The counselor-client relation should not turn into a long-term counseling relationship.

Considering the fact that hotline services work on a volunteering basis, the counselors should understand their own motivations for engaging in hotline work, maintain a stable emotional status, and avoid burnout.

### ***6.3 Professional Relationships***

Counselors should fully respect the clients, and keep an objective and neutral perspective, that is, to accept the clients' emotions. The counselors should not criticize or judge the clients or impose their own values or social norms on the clients. They should not disclose personal contacts to the clients and should avoid being influenced by developing multiple relationships with the client.

### ***6.3 Ethics for the Hotline Agencies***

The psychological hotlines during coronavirus-defeating should be properly positioned, and provide clear and specific scope of services. Professional guidance by experts is required. The agents should practice within an ethical framework. As for the administration, the internal organization should be well specialized and organized. Besides, the hotline agencies should develop management systems, related regulations, documents and deliver them to all members. They should set up professional criteria for screening, selecting ongoing training, supervising, and evaluating personnel for the management of counselors. The agencies take full responsibility of managing and supervising the overall service of the hotline, including ethical monitoring to guarantee qualified service. Hotline agencies should develop a crisis intervention plan and procedure, and establish a network of referral resources [15].

## **7 Discussion**

Psychological hotlines during a public health emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic have different functions and tasks from the general psychological hotline and crisis intervention. The operational procedures should be concise and explicit, with focused goals. It is a big challenge for hotline professionals. As mentioned above, they must be certificated professionals with experience in helping people, rather than para-professionals. Besides, the hotline assistance is often single-session work with a period of 30 minutes instead of the regular 50-minute continuous counseling session. It requires specific training and experience. The professionals should always keep in mind the specialty and operational

procedures of hotline assistance, and acquire proficiency in post-disaster psychological assistance to provide qualified services. More research addressing the development of the competency model of counselors for psychological intervention hotlines during a pandemic is also needed [16]. As the outbreak of COVID-19 spread globally, the helpers themselves are also deeply influenced by the pandemic. Those who live in Wuhan faced the risk of infection and needed to comply with home quarantine. They had to overcome the negative influences on implementing psychological assistance and stay in the position of professional counselors to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention. The self-care of the counselors becomes particularly important in such a situation. It is paramount for them to overcome compassion fatigue and avoid burnout [17,18].

The organizational structure is the basic framework of psychological hotlines. Although the administrative staffs are often non-professional, they are essential for the good functioning of hotlines and for quality assurance. The supervision system is the most prominent highlight of pandemic psychological assistance. It represents the improvement of China's post-disaster psychological intervention system and an increase in the status of supervisors. Referral resources are particularly important to beat the pandemic, especially in the early stages when the public is under stress and panic. It is useful for counselors to have a referral resource in their toolkit. Last but not the least, psychological assistance demands great ethical sensitivity.

The volunteers recruited by the hotlines are experienced mental health professionals with relevant qualifications or certifications in China. Although they may be certificated by different government departments [12], they are acknowledged nationwide and can practice across the country. Under the leadership and guidance of government and psychological communities, mental health professionals were engaged in psychological assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the borderless nature of the hotline, it is quite common to serve the clients all over the country. It also reflects the Chinese culture of "A difficult one, P Plus support" (assistance comes from many different places when one place is in trouble). Taking advantage of the governance system and national culture, the psychological services can practice on a relatively uniform norm [6], which ensures the quality of service.

The operational procedures need to be improved continuously for psychological assistance in the future. The tasks and targets of each stage should be explicitly determined. In the late period of the pandemic, the goal of psychological assistance may shift to grief counseling and general psychological counseling. At that stage, the psychological hotlines need to adjust their functions and goals, perhaps even change their framework and settings. Further research and discussions are needed to address these future possibilities.

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