

# Crisis lines subject of study

By Jen Ellison  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Andrea is a mentally ill woman living in the community. She wants to break up with her lover, but is having a hard time keeping herself from him. She calls the crisis center for help.

"What usually helps you when you're feeling like this?" the counselor on the other end says.

"Well, going out for a walk or sitting to watch TV," Andrea replies. "It would help if I knew that I could call back later."

There is a significant pause. "You can call back if you had an emergency," said the counselor.

"I can't. I won't watch TV, so it would really help if I could call back later," Andrea said.

The counselor went on to discourage Andrea from calling back if it wasn't an emergency and tried to help Andrea come up with something else she could do besides call back. Andrea hung up on the counselor.

Mentally ill women living in the community, outside of institutions, are trying to lead normal lives. One of their major sources of support is a 24-hour crisis line they can call in emergencies.

However, more clients of crisis centers around the country are becoming increasingly unhappy with the services they receive from the counselors.

To help find the cause of the dissatisfaction of the clients, University Assistant Professor Marilyn Whalen took an 18-month post-doctorate fellowship in a Midwestern town, where she worked at a crisis line for the mentally ill. Supported by the National Institute for Mental Health, Whalen recorded 33 hours of conversations between clients and counselors.

Whalen received the \$4,000 Junior Professorship Development Award from the College of Arts and Sciences to research why clients are unhappy and what can be done to better the crisis line services.

Whalen will use the award to hire a research assistant this summer to help her analyze these

calls for the root of the conflicts.

Whalen and her assistant will analyze the transcripts of 20 calls where conflict arose to discover the communication problems and offer solutions to keep conflict from arising.

"It is possible that the conflict is rooted in the little inter-actional events," Whalen said.

The conversations are broken into four parts — the opening, problem presentation, problem solving and the closing.



Marilyn Whalen

The majority of the conflicts are taking place in the problem solving and closing stages, Whalen said.

"The client feels the most comfortable talking about the problem, but the counselor wants to work out the solution," Whalen said.

"Then the counselor wants to get off the phone while the client still wants to talk."

There is miscommunication and the client feels rejected, Whalen said.

In Andrea's case, Whalen believes Andrea was looking for a chance to call back and get better support from someone else. The counselor didn't understand and kept discouraging Andrea from what she thought was a solution.

Whalen is the first person in the nation to study the conflicts between clients and counselors on a crisis line, she said. Her goal is to better the services of crisis lines to clients by identifying what causes conflict and teaching counselors how to avoid those behaviors.

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