

LIFESAVING 24/7 CRISIS TEXT SERVICE LAUNCHED

A new free text-based mental health service funded by the HSE is the first of its kind for Ireland to provide everything from a calming chat to immediate support for people going through a mental health or emotional crisis. It is expected that '50808' will support over 50,000 people each year once it is fully operational.

The service uses an artificial intelligence (AI) system to analyse a texter's initial message, scanning keywords, phrases, and even emojis to determine the level of severity. The texters who are seen to be at most imminent risk are placed at the top of the queue.

There have been over 100 'Active Rescues' via the text service since its pilot phase in September 2019, in which the National Ambulance Service is contacted for a texter in need of emergency support. The service allows trained crisis volunteers to volunteer from home; they complete a 30-hour training and have 24/7 supervision by full-time mental health professionals.

Anne O'Connor, HSE's Chief Operations Officer, said: "The impact of this pandemic will be different for all of us and while not everyone will need mental health support, for those that do, then it's important to have a variety of services that meet those needs.

"Picking up the phone and asking for help can appear daunting, but texting 50808 will connect you to a trained crisis volunteer. Parallel to this important service, the HSE, through our Psychosocial Response Project, is aligning the different levels of supports that are available online, by phone and text to improve accessibility to mental health resources for those who might be struggling at this time."

Ian Power, CEO of 50808, said "We now have over 300 trained crisis volunteers providing free, anonymous support to people who are struggling with any issue, big or small. We're also using technology to ensure we're getting to the texters who need us most, first, and using data to



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understand our texter's needs and improve the service. We're excited to make the '50808' number famous so people who need us, know we're here to listen."

INITIAL FINDINGS OF PILOT PROGRAMME

Since the pilot was rolled out in September last year, the service has provided support to over 3,800 people through up to 6,700 conversations, and has revealed the following:

- 832 people were thinking about suicide.
- 360 people were self-harming.
- Top issues discussed included anxiety/stress (40%), depression/sadness (32%), relationships (29%), isolation/loneliness (23%) and suicide (18%).
- 80% are between the ages of 16 and 34.
- 65% are female, 24% male, 2% transgender and 2% non-binary
- 30% are identified as LGBTI+.

- 35% live with a disability, an existing mental health condition, or other medical condition.
- Reasons for texting: no one else to talk to (50%), want to talk to someone whom they don't know (48%), more comfortable texting than talking (40%), too embarrassed to talk on the phone or in person (31%), no access to a therapist (31%)

