



Connecting people with care for 45 years and into the future

A call to Lifeline for support in the middle of the night by a single mother...

An older man in a country town reading a self-help tool kit to help him cope through difficult times...

A middle aged woman suffering from panic attacks, seeking face-to-face counselling at a Lifeline Centre...

Support for two parents bereaved by the recent suicide of their son...

Access to support for someone with the courage to come forward as a victim of domestic violence...

A divorced man who is feeling lonely accessing the Lifeline website for resources about depression...

Telephone Counselling training for a young woman who wants to learn new skills and give back to her community...

These are just some of the ways in which Lifeline connects with everyday Australians 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Now imagine a world without Lifeline.

For 45 years Lifeline has become a vital part of the community – providing access to mental health support services that connect people with care.

Our Living History

Lifeline was founded in 1963 by the late Reverend Dr Sir Alan Walker, after he received a call by a distressed man who three days later took his own life. Determined not to let loneliness, isolation and lack of support services be the cause of other deaths, Sir Alan launched a telephone counselling service that operated out of the Methodist Central Mission in Sydney. This was the start of what we today know as the first Lifeline Centre – now called Lifeline Sydney and Sutherland.

Today this service has grown, and Lifeline provides 24 hour telephone counselling as a national service. Lifeline now answers over 1200 calls a day, on one national number (13 11 14), staffed by dedicated trained Volunteer Telephone Counsellors.

Lifeline operations have also been expanded to connect people with a range of national services that promote emotional wellbeing, encourage help seeking, and address suicide prevention and awareness.

Lifeline also offers access to a range of programs specific to the needs of local communities. These programs are delivered by a network of Lifeline Centres operating from more than 60 locations Australia wide, with a presence in every state and territory.

Each year Lifeline receives over one million contacts from people connecting to care and support by phone, web or face-to-face. The Lifeline 24 hour telephone counselling line continues to answer over 1300 calls every day. Lifeline's services overcome time and distance by providing support at any time day or night, across both rural and metropolitan Australia.

This work is all made possible by the 11,000 dedicated volunteers who donate their time and skills to support others. Around half of these volunteers work as trained telephone counsellors, while the others assist with the fundraising, retail and administrative activities that keep Lifeline sustainable.

Changing with technology

One of the traits that has made Lifeline a well known and vital part of Australia's mental health landscape is the ability to change with the times and tailor services to meet the needs of the community.

Growing with changes in the technological and cultural environment is important to ensure that Lifeline continues to offer services to help seekers in a way that is accessible and timely. Lifeline is always investigating and initiating new ways in which to use technology to improve current national services and develop new mediums for care.

Key milestones over time have included a move to the "priority 13" telephone number system during the 1990s, which allowed help-seekers to access telephone counselling via one, easy to remember national number. While this made promotion of the service easier and assisted with recall of the all important phone numbers, Lifeline's calls were still being answered by the nearest Lifeline Centre. Overtime the ability to overflow calls to other Centres was implemented however this was still a long way from national call flow.

A major shift in Lifeline's strategic direction occurred in 1999 when the Lifeline Australia (National Office) was moved to Canberra in order to be closer to influential government stakeholders. Subsequent consultation and scoping projects conducted post 2000 resulted in a new future direction for the organisation and a commitment to improving access for callers and utilizing better technology for the delivery of services.

The concept of national call flow and what was to become the *Greater Access Program* was adopted in 2003/04 and became a major priority for Lifeline in order to keep up with demand for 24 hour emotional support and ensure that calls to Lifeline were answered efficiently.

It was acknowledged at the national level that in order to keep up with the need for the Lifeline 24 hour counselling line, a 'virtual call centre' would need to be established, to more efficiently route calls around the country, and better utilize the available volunteer base. It was also becoming evident that the trend for the future was for people to access help through a variety of mediums and technologies, both web and phone based.

After much planning the Lifeline network established a CISCO Internet Protocol Telephony System, allowing calls to be routed over a wide area network (WAN) so that any call to Lifeline's 13 11 14 service, would be answered by the next available volunteer telephone counsellor anywhere in Australia. This improved system was made live in 2007 and Lifeline has since seen a substantial increase in call answer rates.

While national call flow now exists the issue of demand outstripping supply will always be a challenge for a not-for-profit organisation offering resource intensive services around the clock.

Next on the horizon will be the evaluation of new technologies such as SMS based counselling and a greater use of web-technologies. This growth is part of Lifeline's commitment to its mission; placing services that support living and wellbeing within reach of everyone.

With the support of the community, the dedication of volunteers and skilled staff, and a willingness to continue growing with the times, Lifeline will be able to continue connecting people with care for another 45 years and beyond.