

Decreasing abandonment of calls to the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

A collaboration with SAMHSA | 2024

Project summary:

Strengthening crisis care and suicide prevention infrastructure – including improving the efficacy of the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (“988”) – is a high priority for the SAMHSA. The American Rescue Plan invested \$282 million to support transition to the 988 dialing code as a replacement for the 10-digit National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. In the four months before the study, about 44% of calls to 988 were abandoned before the call was routed to a local call center; 11% of remaining calls were abandoned while waiting to be connected to a counselor. SAMHSA seeks to increase the proportion of callers to 988 who connect to care.

Intervention description:

SAMHSA and OES, along with the national administrator of the 988 system, made changes to the integrated voice response (IVR) system and messages that callers hear when calling 988. We prioritized the following changes to the caller experience:

- **Shorter-duration message:** Shortened the automated phone messages to route calls to local call centers and counselors more quickly.
- **Effective communication:** Simplified language to clearly describe options and instructions.
- **Process transparency:** Provided a clear roadmap for the call steps, how to bypass the automated message, and how to text or use the website chat function instead.
- **Calming music:** Changed the music and voices to respond to caller feedback and to reduce anxiety.

What did we learn?

The updated caller experience increased the likelihood of being routed to a call center and increased the likelihood of calls being connected to a counselor. During the four-week study period the updated IVR resulted in approximately 1,400 additional calls answered by a counselor. This effect implies that if all calls to 988 are exposed to the updated IVR over a 12-month period, an additional 36,000 calls would be connected to a counselor.

The project page for this impact evaluation can be [accessed on our website](#).

Insights incorporated:

In this document, we share more details on each of the treatments as well as capture the evidence-based insights incorporated with the hopes that agencies can continue learning from previous efforts.

Insights from the Behavioral and Social Sciences

Shorter duration message¹: Make the automated phone message shorter, with the idea that longer times listening to a message made [callers] likelier to drop off the line. Evidence suggests that that depression slows the perceived passage of time and reduces the ability to sustain attention for long time periods, potentially exacerbating frustration from waiting too long.

Effective communications elements²: Incorporate insights and communication strategies consistent with plain language guidelines and previous OES evaluations, including “keep it simple,” “make it easy,” “make it personal,” and “make it timely.” The simplicity can both make the messages easier to understand and reduce the cognitive load required to pay attention.

Process transparency³: Provide clear expectations for the call steps and what to expect, including what is coming next, how to bypass the automated message system, and how to text or connect to the website instead. This clarity is intended to improve trust and reduce uncertainty about what is to come, providing a feeling of being in control and reducing additional frustration.

Calming effect⁴: Changing the music and voices to respond to caller feedback to improve user experience and reduce anxiety. A warmer and more conversational-sounding voice recording with more appealing music may improve the caller experience, easing the process of the caller reaching a person.

¹ Msetfi, R. M., Murphy, R. A., & Kornbrot, D. E. (2012). The effect of mild depression on time discrimination. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 65(4), 632–645. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470218.2011.608908>

² Office of Evaluation Sciences. *How to design effective communications: What has OES learned?* PDF file. Accessed December 12, 2023. <https://oes.gsa.gov/assets/abstracts/OES%20Learnings%20on%20Writing%20Better%20Communications%202018.pdf>

³ Buell, Ryan W., Ethan Porter, Michael I. Norton. 2021. Surfacing the submerged state: operational transparency increases trust in and engagement with government. *Manufacturing and Service Operations Management* 23(4): 745-1004.

⁴ Elliott, David, Remco Polman, Richard McGregor. 2011. Relaxing Music for Anxiety Control. *Journal of Music Therapy* 48(3): 264-288.

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988 automated phone system features

Initial	Intervention	
Commercial and impersonal-sounding voice	Warmer, conversational-sounding voice	Calming effect Changed to more calming music to help reduce anxiety
Jazz music	More preferred, calming music described as “hopeful and reassuring”	
Cadence between music and messages of 15 seconds, 20 seconds, 30 seconds	Industry-standard cadence of message every 30 seconds	

988 automated phone system scripts (pre-routing): Initial and intervention

Initial	Intervention	
You’ve reached the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.	You’ve reached the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.	
We are here to help.		
Para español oprima el numero dos.	Para español marque el numero dos.	
To reach the Veterans Crisis Line if you are a US Veteran or service member or are calling about one, press 1.	If you are a US Veteran, service member or calling about one, press 1 for the Veterans Crisis Line.	Effective communication Simplified the messages to make the instructions easier to understand Process transparency Provided a clear rationale for monitoring and recording to improve trust
To connect to specialized support for LGBTQ+ under the age of 25, press 3	To connect to support for LGBTQI+ youth and young adults, press 3.	
Otherwise please remain on the line while we route your call to a Lifeline crisis counselor.	Otherwise, to talk with a counselor, stay on the line or press 0.	
[Record as separate voice file from main]: Your call may be monitored and recorded for quality assurance purposes.	To improve 988, your call may be monitored and recorded.	Length Shortened the script, allowing for a 10-second shorter message
[Number of spoken words: 81]	[Number of spoken words: 67]	

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988 automated phone system waiting queue scripts (post-routing): Initial and intervention

Initial	Intervention
[Music plays after a brief pause]	[Brief pause after being routed]
[Music breaks at 18 second intervals for the following message]	We are checking for a counselor who is available to talk. You'll hear music while we do this, and we'll give you an update in 30 seconds. You are not alone. We care and want to support you. Someone will be on the line with you soon.
Please stay on the line while your call is directed to an available responder.	[30 seconds of music]
	We are continuing to check with counselors for someone who is available to talk. You'll continue to hear music, and we'll give you another update in 30 seconds. You can also text 988 to reach a counselor if you prefer to text. Otherwise, please stay on the line. We want to help and will have someone available as soon as possible.
	[30 seconds of music]
	We know your call is urgent and thank you for your patience. While you are waiting, you can find more resources at 988lifeline.org. Please stay on the line to be connected.
	[30 seconds of music]
	We're still working to find someone for you to talk to. If you are in the process of a suicide attempt, please call 911. Otherwise, please stay on the line.
	[30 seconds of music, then loop back to first message]

Process transparency

Included clear expectations to improve trust