

THE MOST DESPERATE CALLS come in the dead of the night, the time when distraught, distressed and depressed people are at the end of their tether and feel they have nowhere else to turn. They are alone and without hope.

Their problems range from gambling debts and business worries to love affairs, but the most common issue is marital discord. The economic downturn has made matters worse, increasing pressure on family finances and deepening rifts that may already exist in troubled marriages.

But help is always at hand. Founded in 2001, the Caritas Family Crisis Support Centre is the first of its kind in Hong Kong, providing telephone hotline services for those in need.

“We are often the last chance for people who are in despair and want to take their own life or do something drastic,” said Angie Lai, the organisation’s Head of Family

Services. “The first job is to calm them down, give them hope and show them that there are resources in the community that can help them. The middle of the night is often the time when people reach their lowest point. That’s why it is so important to have a professional social worker available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

Today, round-the-clock service from the Catholic charity is possible thanks to financial support from the Li Ka Shing Foundation that has helped the centre double its manpower, move into new offices and add new hotlines. The enhanced Caritas Family Crisis Line & Education Centre was launched on 15 April 2008. As well as adding specialised hotlines covering marital affairs, children’s issues, love and addiction, the new centre also offers



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support group services and community education.

With increased manpower and upgraded facilities, the number of calls handled by the centre has tripled, resulting in more timely responses to those in need. The centre often refers callers to other services and professionals such as the police, hospitals and welfare units for further help and treatment.

“We get calls from people of all sorts of different ages and backgrounds but the majority of our cases are about marital relationships, especially affairs,” said Ms Lai. “The financial crisis has made things worse for a lot of people. People have more worries about business failures and debt. When the economy is bad we get more calls as worries about money also cause more marital conflicts.



RT SYSTEM

The Caritas hotline is always there for those in need
By Jon Marsh

She recalled one particular case the centre had dealt with recently involving a middle-aged couple who both had small businesses. The husband ran a factory in Mainland China with his younger brother and the wife owned a beauty salon.

“Both businesses were forced to close because of the downturn and the husband found himself in debt and became depressed,” said Ms Lai. “The wife then discovered that her mother and sister were seriously ill and she was also worried about her son, who was dyslectic and was struggling at school. She also felt the husband’s younger brother should share the responsibility for the debts he was facing.

“The relationship deteriorated and she became very depressed, so she rang the hotline. We advised her to come to our centre and discuss her problems. We then arranged for the husband and wife to attend a financial management workshop that also helps to resolve conflicts between couples.

“The fact that they sat down and discussed their problems helped them to communicate better and the couple began to show mutual understanding. The marriage was saved. They were so grateful that they wrote a letter to thank us. As they have experience of running their own businesses,

the husband and wife were very impressed to hear that the services provided by the centre were the result of a donation from a foundation funded by another businessman – Li Ka-shing.

“When people thank us it is the ultimate satisfaction and keeps the social workers going. It is a difficult job always talking to depressed, angry people.”

Ms Lai also recalled another case when a suicidal young woman rang the hotline. After several conversations with a social worker it emerged that she had been the victim of sexual abuse when she was a child. She had told no one and the sense of shame and anger had festered for years. After sharing her burden, the woman decided that life was worth living and the centre was able to refer her to the appropriate service for further counselling.

“This case was an example of how important it is to gain the trust of the caller,” said Ms Lai. “It takes time to build a relationship so people are willing to talk about things that have been hidden for a long time. There’s a lot of shame. This is where the hotline is so good.

People are more willing to talk about sensitive subjects over the phone especially when they do not have to reveal their identities. Once we know what the problem is we can refer people to medical or social services where they can get long-term help if needed.”

The centre is also subvented by the Social Welfare Department, reflecting the benefits of public-private partnerships. While the Foundation provided financial aid, Mr Li’s companies supplied technical support on website design, the telephone system and hotline recording.

The overall result is clear – an improved, expanded operation that can help more people in need of these important services. 



Clockwise from left: Hard at work in the centre’s new offices; answering a call on the hotline; problems range from gambling debts and business worries to love affairs and marital discord.