

Maximizing the Potential of Paraprofessional Listeners to Promote Psychological Wellbeing during COVID-19

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Abstract

It is already well established that pandemics in general and the COVID-19 one in particular can have adverse consequences on some people's mental well-being. While not everyone will suffer and some may even benefit from the pandemic conditions, having emotional support can reduce the likelihood of poor outcomes and promote psychological wellbeing. Professional mental health networks are understaffed to give adequate support to the number of distressed individuals at this time. Furthermore, there are barriers for many to access professional help. There is empirical support that caring and empathic paraprofessional laypeople can quickly learn Psychological First Aid to reduce the distress load of the general population during pandemics. There are already platforms such as *7-Cups* and Johns Hopkins University that provide free evidence based training for volunteer paraprofessionals. The first author participated in these programs in order to gain competencies as a paraprofessional listener and began providing voluntary support during the current pandemic. First, she outlines the need for such services by describing conditions in Thailand. Next, she shares her experiences of the process of gaining the training and providing services. The second author, a mental health professional, addresses some of the benefits of having paraprofessional listeners along with some important considerations. Promoting such listening programs to the public could have positive societal implications and should be implemented widely with some precautions to ensure professional, competent and ethical services.

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Maximizing the Potential of Paraprofessional Listeners During COVID-19

Before I address how we can maximize the potential of paraprofessional listeners during COVID-19, let me tell you why it is important by describing some of the situations that have been occurring from the eye of a Thai citizen. I will not comment on what is reported in the media as we all know that they need to exaggerate or take sides sometimes as that is part of their jobs. I will only speak from my own personal experiences and from people in my circles who have shared with me.

Many months ago, Thailand was one of the countries that could manage well during this pandemic. We had very low new COVID-19 cases and a low (almost zero) death rate. This was thanks to the Thai people who seemed to be pretty cautious, some overly so to the point of panic. Since the pandemic started, we barely saw anyone out of their own homes not wearing a mask. Masks became a natural part of our body. Alcohol gel overnight became something as important as our wallets when we leave home.

However, the nightmare started because there were some groups who threw parties that included so many people in closed areas despite the warnings from lots of media about the new variant that could spread much faster and is more dangerous for all ages. In addition to that, in regards to our land borders, Facebook advertisements have been seen stating that if anyone pays a certain amount of money, they will bring laborers back to Thailand (without having to quarantine) after having crossed to work in our neighboring countries. As one of the early preventative measures, Thailand's borders have been closed since Spring 2020 and no one can legally enter without going through a mandated 14-day state quarantine.

Only a few weeks after these two topics were the talk of the town, things started to get worse and worse. Many new clusters were found. It went from hundreds of new cases to thousands, and now, in August 2021, there are more than 18,000 new cases each day. There are a lot of serious cases that need to be in the ICU and stay much longer and many that could not make it out of the hospitals.

I know these are things that you might not need or want to hear about. However, without hearing what we are going through, then it would be more difficult to understand why we need more people to be trained as paraprofessional listeners.

Here is the part that I myself struggled with as a Thai citizen. First, there are problems with vaccines. It turned out that the order was approved too slowly and that the company also could not deliver as many doses as agreed upon. When some did arrive, the vaccines were given to public health frontline workers, people aged 60+, and at-risk people with 7 types of serious illnesses. This prioritizing system is fair enough. After I booked appointments for my parents to get vaccinated which took almost a week to get the online system to work and receive a confirmation, the government changed their priority to save working-age adults as they might be able to open the country faster if the workers are safe. So the application for the elderly was closed and my parents' bookings were postponed. Then working-age people who registered could get two doses quickly. I registered as well but the earliest availability was a month away. Many of my cousins and people at my office still could not even find a place to book vaccine appointments.

About a week later, when the death rate continued to rise and it was confirmed that those deaths were mostly among the elderly, they closed the application for working-age people and postponed their bookings until an unspecified date. Can you imagine how first the elderly and then the working-age folks are feeling? Not to mention how the healthcare frontline workers feel seeing the number of new cases rising everyday with more people dead and they themselves got two doses of a vaccine that had not even been approved yet by the World Health Organization. Then I heard from the media that many people died after

receiving the shots. However, they could not get insurance payouts because nobody could confirm (or dare to) that the death was caused by the vaccine.

Then, while we were losing hope waiting for the who-knows-when vaccine, we tried to book appointments in other places even though we would have to pay for it. The sad part is even when private hospitals tried to obtain vaccines, they had to wait for the Central Medical Department to approve it. Money cannot buy your life in this case. The saddest part is now we are under a lockdown again, many businesses are dying, and some people are dying at home possibly related to lack of resources, infrastructure, and access to COVID-19 tests. People are watching their families die because there are not enough hospital beds nor equipment for the amount of people who got COVID-19, and hotlines are too busy and not available to reach out to.

If you have read up to here, I believe that you are starting to feel what we feel. It is not about placing blame; it is about figuring out how to support each other in the best ways possible. Every day I talk to many people: family, friends, and the people from my listening sessions. I also offer to be an ear for those people who comment on social media that they do not want to live like this anymore. If you could see the number of such comments, you would realize that even if I were a robot who could listen to people and offer them a safe space 24/7, it still would not be enough.

During these difficult times when so many are struggling financially, who can afford to see a professional counselor? Let's say there are some people who can afford it, but how long do they have to wait before their first appointment? The minimum time I know of is a month. You have to wait a month to talk for 45 minutes! Imagine how much happens in a month. Who could survive until that time? If they do not get COVID-19, they might end up committing suicide.

How Paraprofessional Listeners Can Help Reduce the Mental Health Impact

Writing about these circumstance is not to blame anyone because there is no point nor benefit in doing that. What I strongly recommend is that we need to collaborate with psychological/health professionals and quickly train local people to be voluntary listeners as fast and as many as possible. This will not only help others who are in distress but, if the ones who are hopeless themselves can shift their focus to help others, they will be much more hopeful and feel their lives are more valuable, appreciated, and have meaning. This is one effective way to prevent negative mental health consequences (e.g., suicide rate) from drastically rising during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a paraprofessional active listener myself who saw many pandemic related changes in the people I supported, I believe we need to take action fast enough to not let a nightmare become a tragedy.

Becoming a better listener is easy, either free or very cheap, and can be learned rather quickly. Let me briefly discuss how I became an effective listener and what my experiences are. For a long time, I often had people coming to talk to me and share things they did not share with others. Back then, I thought of myself as a secret keeper. One day, this happened again. However, because I was close to the person who shared with me, I got too emotionally involved. Since I was not trained, I did not know how to emotionally distance myself enough to help them like professional counselors do. While I was interested in becoming a counselor at the time, I was hesitant to get a Master's Degree in counseling right away because I was not sure if I really liked it enough and, even if I did, I thought it would take too long before I could start helping anyone.

That spurred me to start searching for volunteer listener opportunities. I found 7cups.com which is a U.S. based online chat support service where they allow anyone to be a listener as long as we can pass their tests. So, I completed all of their free online courses and

did almost all the tests available while at the same time supporting people from across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These people come to me with different issues such as depression, domestic abuse, stress, OCD, relationship concerns, and loneliness, among other reasons. There were a lot of people that were feeling depressed and lonely from the lockdowns in their countries. Others could not adapt to the sudden loss of social interactions and needed someone to chat with. Some lost their jobs and businesses.

One challenge for me is that the background data about those seeking support is not given. So, I do not know any of the person's intersecting identities such as gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, etc. or even their name, unless they tell me. I really have to pay 100% attention to every word they say while trying to understand the situation fast enough to respond. I have to memorize important details because the chat history will be automatically deleted by the system for security purposes. On a positive note, it is also good because there is no precipitating judgement nor bias when you know nothing at all about the person you are talking to.

Besides improving listening skills through online trainings offered by platforms like 7 Cups, there are also Psychological First Aid trainings available (some online, some in person). Such trainings are also often free and can enhance one's ability to be a more effective supporter of those who might be struggling. Recently, I took a free online Psychological First Aid course from Johns Hopkins University. Its emphasis is on training local people to be listeners to support people in acute distress. The course applies mostly to natural disasters, but the information can easily be adapted to pandemic related concerns. I applied the training to my own listening field by focusing on being the first line of psychological support available to people.

When people start to have some issues or distress, they feel very bad. Sometimes they know why but many times they do not quite understand the real cause because they focus more on how they feel. In some cases, they can reach out to their family or close friends, but some people find it difficult to impossible to share some topics with their loved ones or they might feel they are not understood. So, anyone could benefit from being trained to be a better listener to be able to better support their loved ones and strangers alike.

Listeners then can become the first line of support to those who may be struggling during this pandemic. Through active listening and asking effective questions, people can understand the issues better. Then together, they can try to find suitable solutions to reduce or get rid of their acute distress and plan for what to do in case it returns.

Benefits of Listeners as a First Line of Support

- Almost anyone who is interested and has compassion in helping others can be quickly trained to do it
- Listeners reap psychological benefits when helping others
- People can come to a listener even for minor concerns (e.g., a small argument with their loved one or work stress)
- It is easier to reach out for support to a lay person in some cultures where seeking professional psychological support is still uncommon and stigmatized
- People might feel more comfortable recommending listening services if they feel listeners are more like friends rather than professionals because some people may feel embarrassed if others knew they see a counselor
- It is cheaper than professional help in terms of training listeners and fees for help seekers
- The waiting time to get support is less if there are enough listeners available

- It reduces the workload of health/psychological professionals who were already overburdened prior to the pandemic
- Health/mental health professionals can refer stable clients to listeners to reduce their workloads and also to reduce the cost of treatment for their clients
- It can prevent small issues from escalating and accumulating into more distressing, more difficult, and more time-consuming issues

Important Considerations

- Some people may not be appropriate to be listeners (e.g., some people with certain personality disorders or ones that are overwhelmed by their own distress)
- The available trainings and tests must be aligned with ethical codes of health/mental health professional organizations
- There must be a clear protocol for when listeners should refer people to professionals (e.g., people who might need long-term treatment, those with mental health disorders causing significant impairment, people in crisis, and people with significant trauma histories)
- Listeners should be well versed in how to refer people to professionals
- Paraprofessional listeners should not deal with crisis cases like suicidal or homicidal ones
- There should be support for listeners such having a mentor or someone to consult with available when needed
- Confidentiality must be the golden rule for listeners

Conclusion

In sum, training and supporting paraprofessional listeners can be another prong in the multipronged approach to reducing the adverse mental health consequences of the current pandemic. Health/mental health professionals and listeners can collaborate to support more people during these difficult times. Listening trainings and services should be promoted widely due to the potential societal benefits. Health/mental health professionals can assist in training listeners quickly with empirically backed resources.

Anyone can become a better listener and provide emotional support to those around them—their loved ones and strangers alike. We hope to see more local people around the globe being trained to be good listeners and—together with health/mental health professionals—we can educate people and make them feel more comfortable to seek support at early stages of distress. And when they do reach out, there will be more competent people ready to support them. If we know how to listen, be present and be empathetic with others, we can make positive changes and reduce the impact of the COVID-19 mental health pandemic.

Resources

7 Cups www.7cups.com

John's Hopkins University Free Psychological First Aid Training
www.coursera.org/learn/psychological-first-aid/home/info