



GROUP 0845 NUMBERS

GUIDELINES FOR HANDLING CHALLENGING CALLS

FOR

DYSTONIA SOCIETY SUPPORT GROUP 0845 HOLDERS

February 2014

Background

The Dystonia Society 0845 numbers are an important and valued resource to enable people with dystonia to make contact with local group and to feel connected with others at a local level.

However, as with all phone-lines which are openly publicised, the volunteers answering the calls can sometimes receive calls which are challenging. Examples include:

- The caller misunderstands the purpose of the phone-line and seeks medical advice or information.
- The caller pushes for information you don't feel able to provide or becomes abusive.
- The caller becomes distressed and seeks emotional support beyond that the volunteer is qualified to provide.
- The caller discloses information that suggests a threat to themselves or to others.
- The caller discloses information that suggests that they or another vulnerable person(s) are the subject of abuse (this can be physical, financial, emotional, sexual, verbal or neglect).

It is important to emphasise that such calls are very rare in the context of the Dystonia Society but they have happened on occasion. When they occur, they can be stressful to deal with.

It is also important to be aware that, by answering an official Society phone-line, you may be in receipt of information that places an obligation on yourself and the Society to inform the authorities.

Using the guidelines below, all situations that arise should be manageable.

The Golden rule is:

If you do not feel able to take a call then you should seek an appropriate opportunity to refer the caller to a specialist service usually:

- The Dystonia Society helpline
- Or the Samaritans if the caller is suicidal
- Or accident and emergency (A&E) if the caller is immediately unwell
- Or call an ambulance for them if they require urgent treatment (you need to tell the person you are talking to that you are doing this)

If there is a threat of harm then the police need to be informed.

Initial message

To ensure callers understand the purpose of the phone-line, when dialling the group 0845 numbers they will hear the following recorded message before the call starts:

'This number will put you in touch with a volunteer and is for the purpose of giving information about our local dystonia group, together with details of the next group meeting. For all other matters, please contact the Dystonia Society helpline on 0845 458 6322'

Confidentiality

The Dystonia Society has a confidentiality policy which commits us to keep all information disclosed to us private (unless there is a risk – see below). It is important that when taking calls you do so in a secure and confidential space where you are unlikely to be interrupted. The content of the call should not be told to anyone else outside the Society.

However, confidentiality is between the **caller and the organisation** not between the caller and the individual group co-ordinator. This means you are always free to discuss any concerns you have with the helpline, the Group Support & Development Officer (or Scottish Regional Officer in Scotland) or the Chief Executive.

Also, if the call discloses a risk of harm to a caller or someone else or there is a history or threat of abuse, then there may be an obligation to disclose this information to the police or local authority (see below).

If the caller seeks medical advice or information

The same guidelines apply as with the Group agreement:

- Volunteers must not make diagnoses, provide information or advice on dystonia, give advice about treatment or recommend treatment centres.
- Volunteers should also remember that criticism of named individuals or organisations could be defamation and have legal implications.

It is important to stay within the role of a volunteer and to signpost requests for information either to the National Helpline, or to caller's own medical practitioners. If the caller presses for information, volunteers need to make callers aware that they are not medically qualified or trained to respond to such requests.

If you feel uncomfortable with any call you are quite within your rights to explain that you are not able to take the call and refer them to The Dystonia Society National Helpline on 0845 458 6322.

If the caller becomes pushy or abusive

If the caller will not take "no" for an answer, becomes verbally abusive or makes you feel uncomfortable then you are always within your rights to end the call – saying "I am going to end this call now".

If you have ended a call in this manner, you should always call the helpline, the helpline manager or the Chief Executive (mobiles below) to let them know what's happened.

If they persist in calling then you can let calls go to the answer machine or ask the Society's administrator to divert calls to head office until the situation calms down.

As you may not know who are talking to, it is also always safer to be very cautious about disclosing any information about yourself

If the caller becomes distressed

Many people with dystonia can be distressed and giving support is a valuable role volunteers can play. However, the distress of the caller can sometimes be at a level that requires trained support. It is not always easy to identify when a call has reached this point – but good indicators are if the call is making you anxious or if you find yourself pushed beyond a listening role and starting to suggest courses of action.

In these circumstances, the best step is to explain that you are a volunteer and that the Dystonia Society National Helpline on 0845 458 6322 would be a better place to seek help.

If the caller discloses information that suggests a threat to themselves

You may become concerned that caller may harm themselves – this may be because they mention self-harm or suicide or because their presentation is worryingly distressed. If this is the case you should never ignore it:

- You should explain to the caller that you are concerned about their well-being and ask for the address where they are and for their phone number (if you don't know already).
- If they have mentioned suicide or self-harm, you should repeat their words back to them to clarify what they are saying and explain to them that you have a duty to seek help if they do mean it.
- If you believe they are desperate, you could suggest that they call the Samaritans (08457 90 90 90).
- Unless they have completely reassured you, you should call the police immediately the call is finished and ask them to do a "safe and well" check. **If in any doubt at all, you must call the police before you do anything else.**

You should also call the Dystonia Society immediately on the Society's main switchboard (0845 458 6211) or, out of office hours, the Helpline Manager or Chief Executive (mobiles below).

If the caller discloses information that suggests a threat to others

You should terminate the call immediately and call the police.

You should also call the Dystonia Society immediately after the police on the Society's main switchboard (0845 458 6211) or, out of office hours, the Helpline Manager or Chief Executive (mobiles below).

If the caller discloses information that a vulnerable person is the subject of abuse

People with dystonia in receipt of local authority support are designated 'vulnerable adults'. If anyone involved in the Society becomes aware of abuse of such people we have a legal obligation to inform the local authority within 24 hours. Abuse in this context can include physical abuse, financial abuse such as theft or coercive borrowing, psychological abuse such as bullying, sexual abuse, verbal abuse or neglect.

If you become aware of such abuse they should report it as soon as possible. Within working hours this can be done via the helpline on 0845 458 6322 but outside of working hours and at weekends the group coordinator should refer the case to the out of hours social services department at the local council.

You should also call the Dystonia Society immediately. Out of office hours you can call the helpline manager or Chief Executive (mobiles below).

If you feel you've made a mistake and mishandled a call

Calls sometimes develop quickly giving you insufficient time to think. After finishing the call, you may reflect that you should have handled things differently or feel uneasy that you got things wrong.

This can happen to anyone – however experienced they are.

These concerns can almost always be sorted out if acted on promptly. The best step is to call the Dystonia Society helpline to talk through your worries. Out of office hours you can call the Helpline Manager or Chief Executive (mobiles below).

After the call

Look after yourself after the call and give yourself time to debrief that call before moving on to something else. You can always call the Dystonia Society helpline – talking to someone can help you unwind and vent the stress that may have built up.

Useful numbers:

- The Dystonia Society helpline: **0845 458 6322**
- The Dystonia Society switchboard: **0845 458 6211**
- Una Rennard – Group Support & Development (England, Wales & Northern Ireland) – During working hours: **0845 458 6334**
- Dorothy Chisholm – Scottish Regional Officer (Scotland) – During working hours: **0845 803 1006**
- Samaritans: **08457 90 90 90**
- Angie Brown Helpline Manager mobile:
- Paul King Chief Executive Mobile:
- Police / Ambulance: **999**