

This guide is for managers or workers in frontline services organisations who communicate by text with survivors, or have responsibility or influence over policies on worker communications with survivors.

Benefits of communicating via text with survivors

Text messaging is a very common way that front-line practitioners communicate with survivors. It can be an effective tool to keep survivors engaged, relay information quickly, and remind them of important deadlines. This is helpful when a survivor needs information quickly and can't talk on the phone. Sometimes, texting may be more reliable than connecting through a phone call.

Texting is best as a form of communication when used to supplement in-person meetings or phone calls. Texting only relationships between a worker and survivor can be challenging because of all the safety and privacy concerns discussed below. In some rare cases, a worker and survivor may only be able to text; in which case, it is recommended that workers check in regularly with survivors about privacy and safety concerns.

1. Safety & privacy concerns for survivors

Documentation. Unlike a verbal conversation, texts contain a full history of the conversation. This means that if someone has access to a survivor's phone, they can read the entire thread of a conversation between the survivor and their worker. This can have major implications for the survivor's safety and privacy. On the worker's side, the phone also contains a history of the conversation, which could be accessible by colleagues or others.

Impersonation. When texting, it is difficult to be sure that the person you are texting with is in fact the survivor and not someone *pretending* to be the survivor. Mobile phones are easily picked up by friends, family, and even the abuser. If the survivor's mobile phone doesn't have a passcode on it (or another person knows what it is), it is very easy for someone to pick up the phone to view and respond to texts.

Miscommunication. Texting lacks the nuance of in-person and over-the-phone communications. What might be conveyed by body language or tone of voice is missing, so your texts might be perceived as blunt or insensitive, or simply unclear, and you may not be able to perceive a survivor's state of mind or intended meaning accurately. Also keep in mind that many acronyms and abbreviations used in text messaging may not have the same meaning or connotation to the recipient.

2. Best practices for front-line workers

Don't use your personal phone. It is better to use a dedicated work mobile phone owned by your organisation when texting or calling survivors. There are too many privacy and confidentiality concerns when using a personal phone to communicate with survivors. These concerns are detailed below in *Why you shouldn't use a personal mobile to text survivors*.

Don't keep survivor information in contacts. Don't save survivors' full name, phone number, and other contact information into the phone's contacts. Save as little information as possible, and when the survivor-worker relationship is over, delete all their contact information from the phone.

Delete text history logs. Consider periodically deleting conversations, so the phone doesn't store months (if not years) of text conversations between the survivor and worker on a mobile phone.

Check in regularly about safety and privacy. It's easy to become comfortable with texting and assume that the person you're texting with is the survivor. If possible, check in through other ways, such as a phone call, video chat, or in-person meeting.

Be aware of the potential for miscommunication. Like email, it is easy to miss or misread emotional cues in written communications. Check in regularly to make sure that you both understand one another.

Set expectations and boundaries. Before texting, always have a conversation with a survivor about when and how you can text one another. Set boundaries and expectations, so the survivor knows your available work hours and when you can and can't respond.

3. Safety Suggestions For Survivors

Delete text history logs. Talk to the survivor about deleting sent and received messages, as well as the organisation's number from their text log.

Determine if it's safe to keep the worker's name and phone number in her contacts. If an abusive person is monitoring the survivor's phone (either because he has physical access to her phone or can monitor it remotely), it might not be safe for her to store the worker's name and phone number in her contacts.

Encourage the survivor to check in. Because texting may not be the best method for communicating about highly emotional or intense topics, encourage the survivor to check in about her safety or feelings about what is being communicated. If possible, do this check-in either via a phone call or face-to-face meeting rather than via text.

4. Why you shouldn't use your personal mobile to text survivors

Inherent lack of privacy. If a worker uses her/his personal mobile phone to text with survivors, there are many privacy and safety issues to consider.

1. The first is that the survivor will know the worker's personal phone number. Unlike phone calls, when you text, you cannot make your number "private." This could become a safety issue if the abusive person finds out the worker's personal phone number. It can also imply that the worker is available to respond to a survivor outside their working hours.
2. The second is that if workers are using their personal phones, their family and friends may pick up their phones and potentially see confidential conversations between the worker and a survivor. It is not appropriate for a worker's friends and family to know about their communications with a survivor.
3. The third issue is that when a worker leaves your organisation, the organisation loses control over any information stored on the phone, since the phone belongs to the worker.

Mobile phones are always with the worker. The other concern when using mobile phones and texting is that there may be an assumption that the worker will always have the mobile phone with her and can text at any time.

5. Third-Party Messaging Apps/Services

Because of the inherent lack of privacy with texting, some organisations and workers have considered using a third-party texting app. Some of these apps allow texts messages to disappear after a certain period or promise better encryption. There are pros and cons to using these third-party texting services.

The benefits are that some of these services offer additional features, such as:

- Messages can be set to disappear after a period of time.
- Additional encryption, making it less vulnerable to "hacks."
- Access to the service from a tablet, computer, or another phone, which can be helpful if a survivor's phone has been compromised or she gets a new phone.
- It can be another method of communication if the survivor believes the abusive person is currently monitoring her texts.

However, there are also some issues to using these third-party texting services.

Downloading an app or service could be inconvenient or unsafe for the survivor

The first issue is the requirement for the survivor to download a third-party app or service. For some survivors, downloading an app to text or use solely to communicate with their worker might be a helpful strategy; for other survivors, it may be an additional barrier for them and even a safety issue if their abusive person is monitoring the apps and services they download. Talk to survivors to see if it is helpful for them to use a third-party messaging service.

Additional privacy and safety concerns

Most (if not all) of the third-party message services require the user to create an account. Depending on how they set up the account, it could inform the abusive person that they've downloaded a new messaging service.

One of the benefits of these texting services is that it can be accessible via different devices. However, this also means that if the abusive person knows about the survivor's account, he could be monitoring those messages without ever needing access to her phone. Be sure to go through the security and privacy settings on these apps to make sure no one else is accessing the account.

Sometimes, these apps will require access to other content on the phone, such as contacts or photos. The survivor should check to see if she's comfortable with that access and opt out where appropriate. Additionally, some messaging apps, when connected to the survivor's contacts, may inform people in her contacts who are also using the messaging app that the survivor now has an account on that app. The survivor may not want others to know that she's using the third-party messaging app. Learn what type of access, connections, and automatic sharing the app does and check to see if the survivor can opt out of those connections and sharing.

6. Best Practices – Text Hotlines

In some cases, organisations may want to include texting as a way survivors can contact a hotline. Text hotlines have fundamental privacy concerns, so it's important that organisations strategise around some of these issues.

Texting is not anonymous. Texting, by its nature, is difficult to make anonymous. The person texting cannot hide her phone number when she texts (unless she uses a virtual number, which most people do not), so the organisation will be collecting mobile phone numbers from those they text. If the hotline promises anonymous calls and texts, the organisation will need to implement policies on how it collects, stores, and shares phone numbers from those who text. Also check billing records to see if the texting part of your bills contain actual phone numbers. If it does, limit who can have access to those billing records.

Do not store text conversation. Consider not recording or keeping the phone number or text log of a hotline text conversation. If the organisation hotline does not record and keep phone calls, treat text conversations the same way. Where possible, text histories should not be recorded or deleted right away.

Assess for safety. Although a text hotline may not be conducive to a thorough intake, organisations should still assess for safety and inform the survivor of the risks in using texts to communicate. Survivors may not be aware of the possible risks when using text messaging. Begin text conversations by informing the survivor of issues they should be aware of, such as: whether the conversation will be viewed/seen by anyone else (within the organisation), whether the worker may have to make any mandatory reporting disclosures (such as imminent harm), and any other information survivors need to know. Workers can end text conversations by informing the survivor that the conversation will be deleted on the organisation's side, and sharing tips on safe texting practices.