

Part 1: Introduction to callers' issues

Lifeline Shanghai (LLS) was originally set up to work with the foreign community in Shanghai in 2004. We are an English speaking service and anyone who speaks English can contact us. This includes Chinese people in need of our services.

Although we take calls from anywhere in China, our callers are predominately based here in Shanghai. We can ascertain this from the callers' conversations. We also have a Live Chat service and have been contacted by chatters from a variety of worldwide destinations as well as China.

This short introductory reading session considers the main callers' issues that foreigners (and often Chinese returning from overseas) can face.

**Please note the term 'callers' is used but covers both callers and chatters i.e. anyone who contacts us.*



Why does anyone contact a helpline?

Talking in real-time to a trained volunteer (or professional counsellor) provides immediate support and can also allow a caller to be connected to additional places to get help.

A caller does not have to be in a serious crisis to call a helpline. Some call simply to obtain information and referrals for local community services. Some though call firstly to ask for information then during the call feel able, thanks to the helpline assistant's approach, to open up more about issues that may be worrying them. This is why having a trained volunteer or counsellor is important. Other people call because they have something that is on their mind that they want to talk over with someone outside of the current situation.

Of course, if someone is in a serious emotional crisis, then a helpline such as Lifeline Shanghai is there for that too. Most of our calls though are not crisis calls. LiveChat is very similar to this but some people are more comfortable writing rather than speaking to us.

Top 5 issues for callers to Lifeline Shanghai

1. health (physical and mental)
2. financial
3. work
4. cultural
5. relationships

Sometimes callers have a mix of issues which is why it can be difficult to give truly precise figures about our calls. Other times, it can't really be determined what the issue is, or is a completely separate issue from the above.



Health Issues

There can be problems with both physical and mental health here. On average just over a third to 40% of our calls are related to health.

Examples of physical health issues are:

- What to do in an emergency [L] [SEP]
- Finding out about international healthcare facilities [L] [SEP]
- Locating Chinese hospitals possibly those with VIP sections [L] [SEP]
- Where to go for an abortion [L] [SEP]
- Vaccination questions [L] [SEP]
- Coping with physical problems of addictions [L] [SEP]
- How to get a home visit [L] [SEP]
- Where to find (for example) a German speaking dentist or a Spanish speaking gynaecologist [L] [SEP]
- Questions about TCM facilities [L] [SEP]

Mental health issues are usually related to enquiring about therapists who are available (how and where to find them) in Shanghai, and occasionally elsewhere in China.

Examples of mental health issues are:

- Where to find (for example) a French speaking therapist [L] [SEP]
- Where to find a therapist who specializes in eating disorders in young people [L] [SEP]
- How to find a therapist who specializes in couples counselling [L] [SEP]
- Psychiatrists in Shanghai [L] [SEP]
- Needing a prescription or repeat prescription [L] [SEP]
- Coping with addictions

Financial Issues

We generally have a small number of calls on this topic (around 5%). Calls are usually linked to the cost of health care. For example, if healthcare insurance doesn't cover mental illness, this becomes a concern or maybe a caller doesn't have any health insurance at all. As you probably know, it can be a concern if you start off on an expat type package then go on to a local contract. The insurance might not be the same.

Callers might want to want to change jobs or feel forced to do so and there could be all sorts of financial implications. There is more and more financial insecurity now, contracts are changed. More people come here looking for work, or have lost a job here. In the past people went home now they stay, not always legally and it is a problem if they get sick or they are unemployed.



Work Issues

Calls about work issues have increased and usually account for about 10- 15% of calls.

Callers are sometimes unhappy at work, they have made the wrong choice of job, they want to leave but are unsure of what to do, and maybe they have issues with their co-workers or boss (or both) or are extremely stressed or are unemployed. They can feel isolated at work and feel unhappy with their terms and conditions of employment.

Cultural Issues

It probably depends on where you lived before coming here and what you have experienced before as to how well and quickly you will settle down. This is true of our callers. Although cultural difference is such a big topic, we get surprisingly few calls *specifically* about it (usually less than 5%)



Moving to another country and another culture can be a shock. However much or however long we try and prepare for the move there can be times when we experience reactions such as anger, sadness, depression and frustration. We can feel isolated and without support.

We can be very lonely in a different cultural setting. There can be a sense of loss, anxiety and homesickness. Things can be bad during holiday times when friends have gone away or when good friends leave permanently.

Typical calls are linked to feeling lonely, not knowing anyone, not being able to meet anyone either as a friend or potential partner, living alone, feeling homesick, and feeling depressed can all be as a result of cultural differences. Returning Chinese who have lived outside China can find it very hard to readapt to life here, returning because of an obligation to look after elderly family members or returning because of other family pressures, after a divorce, or lack of employment prospects in the west, can all be very problematic aspects for them.

We have calls from those having problems with cultural differences or from those having difficulties adjusting to life here despite their best efforts. We can all have a 'bad China day' and this can be reflected in our callers but more often than not there are underlying issues going on too.



Relationship Issues

This is the biggest issue here. Almost half our calls have some sort of relationship issues. On average 45% of those contacting us have some sort of relationship issue.

Examples of calls include: infidelity, problems with children, problems with parents, abusive relationships, lack of trust, non-communication, breaking up with a partner, divorce, same sex relationship issues, divorce, intimate relations between single people, disagreements with friends, adjusting to life in Shanghai with a new baby, dissimilar expectations, alcohol and drug related issues, sexual problems, suicide and grief.

Relationship issues can, of course, be found outside family or friend situations: in a work environment or with neighbours. But generally our callers are concerned with more personal relationships and for this reading session we are concentrating on some of these more typical issues.

So how do some of these relationship issues come about? Let us consider some situations:

For example, if a couple meet in Shanghai, differing expectations and cultural differences between the two of them can emerge. The environment may also be different for one or both of them and this too can lead to difficulties in a relationship.

Or consider another scenario: A couple arrive here in Shanghai already with a few relationship problems. Maybe the relationship was already unhappy, or maybe it just had a few cracks. Perhaps the children didn't want to come here so there is even more pressure on the parents to help them settle down. There could have been mental health issues in the past that resurface while trying to cope in this new environment. Any previous problems experienced before coming here will probably intensify.



Then added on to any relocation problems and feeling far from family and friends, it is hard to find someone to talk to and there can be feelings of loneliness. But going home isn't really an option as it is the partner who is the breadwinner.

Of course other relationship issues can arise as time goes on here: when a couple landed at Pudong, everything was fine but one of the couple gave up a good job to follow the partner, this partner is now working very long hours and there is little or no communication anymore. There could be resentment that childcare and looking after a new baby falls on the accompanying partner. Childcare is not shared as things used to be.

When the partner comes home all he (usually male) wants to do is relax, he is tired out. Perhaps that's because he's working too hard or has found himself a girlfriend, or is having an affair with a colleague. (It can of course also be difficult for men who follow their partners but we do not seem to get calls from them as we do from women).

Adjusting to life here can prove more difficult than envisaged; this impacts on daily life and that of the partner/family. It's easy here to start playing too hard and/ or working too hard. It's easy to get homesick perhaps compounded by worrying about an ill or dying family member back home. If the job contract is not what it seemed but it is very hard to leave before the contract is up, otherwise it will mean resigning from

the company, it can all put pressure on relationships.

Perhaps some of these issues are those we would face in our home country, or one in which we had settled before coming to China. It can be especially hard though to find one's way here, to find friends who will listen or to find resources that we might take for granted at home or in other countries we have lived in. Problems are often compounded here. We hope that Lifeline Shanghai can help!

