

**9-8-8**

**Suicide Crisis Helpline**

**Ligne d'aide en cas de  
crise de suicide**

# **Canadian Crisis Line Response Competency Framework for Suicide Prevention**



# Canadian Crisis Line Response Competency Framework for Suicide Prevention

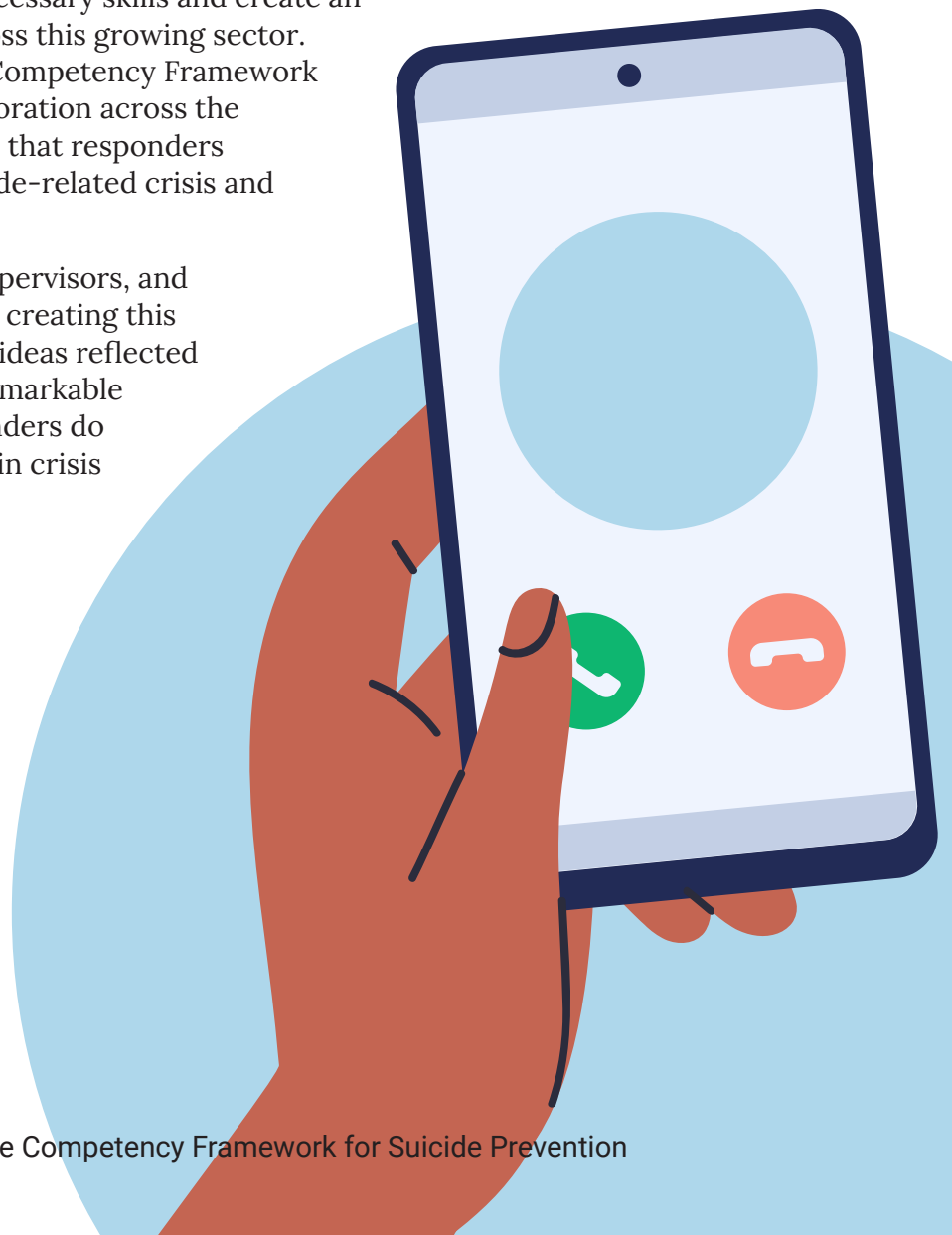
## Announcing the new framework

Vital suicide prevention services are delivered to the public by Canadian crisis line responders every day. As the sector grows and evolves with the transformative potential of 9-8-8, identifying best-practices for crisis service will allow all people living in Canada to receive access to high quality care that will save lives.

We know that thousands of responders make crisis services possible. They bring many skills and strengths to this important service. We also know that as a sector, there is considerable expertise and resources provided by the many organizations that make up the network of crisis and distress centres.

It is our aim to document these necessary skills and create an avenue for sharing knowledge across this growing sector. The Canadian Suicide Prevention Competency Framework for Crisis Line Response is a collaboration across the sector to define the roles and skills that responders bring to supporting people in suicide-related crisis and emotional distress.

We thank the many responders, supervisors, and administrators who participated in creating this framework. We hope you see your ideas reflected here. The Framework shows the remarkable breadth of skilled work that responders do to respond effectively to someone in crisis or distress.



## Why develop a competency framework?

Access to high quality crisis line response is central to suicide prevention; however, the responder role has not been consistently defined or evaluated. Responder competencies and the transition to competency-based training and practice will define the core skills that are necessary to be a responder. Ensuring that all responders have these core skills will also support consistent and quality care for people in distress.

Despite the existence of a variety of standards and procedures used to support crisis lines services, such as the Imminent Risk policy introduced by the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (NSPL) in the United States, and the organizational accreditation standards for helplines administered by the American Association of Suicidology (2019), gaps remain in ensuring that knowledge is widely available and brought into practice. Variable intervention approaches are employed during crisis line interactions (Gould et al., 2013; Gould et al., 2016; Mishara, 2007a; Mishara, 2007b; Sindahl et al., 2019), and training practices and policies remain inconsistent across the sector (Mishara et al., 2007a; Ramchand et al., 2017).

It is also increasingly recognised that responders – both volunteer and paid – provide vital services, and a competency framework supports the acknowledgement of these skills and professionalization of the sector. Competency-based training and practice for crisis line responders moves beyond checklists or procedural documents to encompass levels of performance that result from the integration and mobilization of knowledge, skills, judgment, and abilities that responders bring to their work (Tardif, 2006).

## Benefits of Competency-Based Education and Practice

Competency-based education (CBE) is an approach to teaching and learning that gears training to what “competencies,” or skills and behaviours, are required to be proficient at a role. It is oriented to outcomes and is practical. CBE for crisis line responders would ensure that training and evaluation lead to proficiency in the competencies that are required to achieve mastery as a responder.

### CBE provides an Organizing Framework

- Defines competencies.
- Competencies are observable and comparable to objective criteria for all learners.
- Assessment is criterion-referenced (i.e., responders measured against set standards and not each other).

### Is Learner-centered

- Involves active engagement of learners in managing their learning, in regular self-assessment, and in ongoing frequent assessment of progress.

### Is Responsive to Societal Needs

- CBE is a mechanism to align curriculum goals with caller/texter needs and optimal crisis response service delivery.

# What is a competency framework?

## A competency framework:

- Describes the knowledge, skills and attitudes required of crisis line responders to practice safely and competently.
- Informs aspects of training and performance assessment
- Outlines the components of successful crisis line practice.

## What it is not:

- Curriculum topic list, crisis line standards, or policy and procedure document.

# How was this competency framework developed?

We followed a validated model for developing the competency framework (Bhatt et al., 2021), which is detailed in the table below:

|                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Step 1: Plan</b>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Convened an expert working group</li><li>• Explored content, style and application of other competency frameworks</li><li>• Clarified intended uses and purposes</li><li>• Determined scope</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Step 2: ID Contexts of Practice</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Environmental Scan</li><li>• Scoping Review to understand the extent and type of evidence pertaining to direct service training (e.g., for responders and supervisors) in the crisis line sector</li><li>• Existing needs assessments, competency frameworks, curricula, standards, and/or training approaches in the crisis line sector</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Step 3: Explore Practice</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Survey of Canadian crisis line sites to better understand current practice</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Step 4: Test &amp; Translate</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Iterative line-by-line coding of standards and policy documents to generate categories of data and descriptions: AAS (2019); CSPS Policies and procedures; International Council of Helplines (ICH) Online Emotional Support (2021)</li><li>• Findings translated into preliminary competency framework</li><li>• Review and feedback by expert panel</li><li>• Revised framework developed and competency statements were generated</li><li>• Two cycles with key crisis line personnel (through virtual focus-groups) and broader Canadian suicide prevention sector stakeholders (at the annual Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, 2022) provided feedback and validation of the generated items.</li></ul> |
| <b>Step 5: Sharing &amp; Implementing</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sharing the Competency Framework</li><li>• Applying the Competency Framework to current and future Talk Suicide responder training (inclusive of curriculum, tools and key performance evaluation metrics)</li><li>• Reporting on processes and outputs (academic presentations and publications, presentations within the crisis community)</li><li>• Developing an implementation plan and deployment strategy</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Step 6: Evaluate, Update &amp; Maintain</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advancing an evaluation strategy and review schedule</li><li>• Revising and refining the competency framework</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

Model adapted from: Batt, A., Williams, B., Rich, J., & Tavares, W. (2021). A six-step model for developing competency frameworks in the healthcare professions. *Frontiers in medicine*, 2601.

# Canadian Crisis Line Response Competency Framework for Suicide Prevention

The Canadian Suicide Prevention Competency Framework for Crisis Line Response is structured around 4 key competency domains: **engagement**; **risk and strength assessment**; **safety planning and action**; and **support and navigation**.



These competencies are enacted through 4 interrelated responder roles: **communicator**; **professional**; **advocate**; and **life-long learner**. Definitions are provided below.

The next section outlines the key competencies and examples of application to practice for each domain and each role.

## Core Competencies

Each of the competency areas lists essential abilities known as key competencies, and associated practice-based applications. Practice-based applications describe in greater detail the components of a key competency.

## Core Competency

# Engagement

The foundational approach to establishing initial contact, rapport and collaboration with a caller/texter. Engagement occurs from the start to the end of interaction.

| KEY COMPETENCIES                                                                                                                           | PRACTICE-BASED APPLICATION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1.0 Build rapport and connection with the caller/texter</b>                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use authenticity.</li><li>• Engage with respect and non-judgement.</li><li>• Be attuned to the needs of the caller/texter.</li><li>• Assess whether the caller/texter is safe to speak freely.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>2.0 Use Active Listening appropriately</b>                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Listen with presence and attention.</li><li>• Appropriate use of open-ended and clarifying questions.</li><li>• Listen without judgement and without imposing solutions or coming to a conclusion.</li><li>• Understand when to use active listening and when to use collaborative problem solving, in response to caller/texter's needs.</li></ul>                        |
| <b>3.0 Use validation</b>                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Acknowledge experiences of suffering and distress.</li><li>• Acknowledge what is understandable or makes sense about a caller/texter's feelings, thoughts or behaviours without affirming or reinforcing self-harm or suicide.</li><li>• Accurately reflect back emotions and thoughts expressed by the caller/texter.</li></ul>                                           |
| <b>4.0 Elicit the present needs and goals of the caller/texter</b>                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand the caller/texter's reason for initiating the interaction and what they hope to achieve.</li><li>• Elicit and explore the values, needs and preferences of the caller/texter relevant to why they initiated the interaction.</li><li>• Recognize that some callers/ texters may have difficulty identifying or articulating their needs and/or goals.</li></ul> |
| <b>5.0 Demonstrate the ability to manage challenging caller/texter presentations (e.g., angry, intoxicated, or frequent caller/texter)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Set, communicate, and maintain respectful boundaries.</li><li>• Demonstrate respect for the caller/texter's social, emotional, and cultural boundaries.</li><li>• Manage inappropriate behaviour of the caller/texter in accordance with organizational policies and procedures.</li></ul>                                                                                 |

## Core Competency

# Risk & Strength Assessment

The assessment of suicidal thoughts, personal experiences, suicidal desire, suicidal capacity, and suicidal intent. This includes the assessment of protective factors, strengths, and resources.

| KEY COMPETENCIES                                                                           | PRACTICE-BASED APPLICATION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>6.0 Assess suicide risk</b>                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognize that anyone can be at risk for suicide and that some populations are at elevated risk for suicide.</li><li>• Ask directly about suicide early in the interaction.</li><li>• Identify thoughts and feelings about suicide, including suicidal desire and wish to die.</li><li>• Identify suicide-related behaviours, including plans, actions and intent to carry about plan.</li><li>• Ask directly about any steps they have taken today.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>7.0 Identify immediate or imminent safety risks</b>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify a suicide attempt in progress or imminent risk of a suicide attempt.</li><li>• Ask about access to firearms and other lethal means.</li><li>• Ask about medication access and use.</li><li>• Identify the need for acute medical intervention or need for emergency services.</li><li>• Identify risk of harm to others including assault, homicide, or interpersonal violence.</li><li>• Identify risk of child maltreatment and take appropriate child protection steps.</li><li>• Know when to consult with a supervisor or expert as needed to help determine imminence of risk and appropriate actions for safety.</li></ul> |
| <b>8.0 Assess protective factors and strengths caller/texter</b>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demonstrate understanding of protective factors against suicide, including internal and external factors.</li><li>• Actively support the caller/texter to identify areas of protection and strength.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>9.0 Identify mental health and/or substance use factors that can contribute to risk</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify potential signs of substance intoxication and withdrawal in current presentation.</li><li>• Identify potential mood changes and/or mental health concerns in current presentation.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>10.0 Use documentation appropriately to support safety of caller/texter.</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Access available documentation regarding previous interactions with caller/texter to further support safety and risk assessment, when appropriate.</li><li>• Document risk and protective factors for suicide.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

## Core Competency

# Safety Planning & Action

The collaborative development and/or review of a plan to reduce risk, amplify strengths, build hope, and empower the caller/texter to work towards securing their own safety. When that is not possible, this may include the involvement of emergency services.

| KEY COMPETENCIES                                                                                                                                                                | PRACTICE-BASED APPLICATION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>11.0 Collaborate with the caller/texter to develop, apply or adapt a safety plan based upon their identified level of risk, strengths and protective factors, and needs.</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognize when a safety plan is indicated (e.g., caller is at high risk of suicide).</li><li>• Use an evidence-informed approach to collaborative safety planning.</li><li>• Ask the caller/texter if they have a safety plan.</li><li>• Support caller/texter to identify triggers and situations that might benefit from a safety plan, including emotional states, stressful life events, and suicidal thoughts.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>12.0 Collaborate to take action to improve safety in the moment.</b>                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In cases where access to a means of suicide are identified, support the caller/texter to safely remove and/or restrict access to means.</li><li>• Assess whether substance intoxication is currently impacting suicide thoughts and/or safety and support the caller/texter to safely remove and/or restrict access to sources of intoxication.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>13.0 Demonstrate appropriate use of emergency services</b>                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recognize appropriate circumstances in which to involve emergency services.</li><li>• Use least invasive course of action.</li><li>• Access experts (e.g., poison control) to make informed recommendations regarding current safety, as indicated and in accordance with policy.</li><li>• Intervene in acute medical emergencies and/or life-threatening situations to self or others.</li><li>• Use tools and strategies to locate services users at imminent risk, if they do not share their contact information or location.</li><li>• Recognize circumstances in which there is a duty to report in their jurisdiction.</li></ul> |
| <b>14.0 Provide appropriate follow-up to ensure safety</b>                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Initiate follow-up with services users at risk of suicide, as indicated and in accordance with policy.</li><li>• When a call or text is initiated by a 3rd party, evaluate the need for additional follow-up with the person-at-risk</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>15.0 Use collaborative problem solving techniques appropriately</b>                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explore options, actions, and approaches to the current caller/texter-identified problem.</li><li>• Explore what solutions and actions have been tried and helpful in the past.</li><li>• Where there is ambivalence about living or dying, explore reasons for living.</li><li>• Collaboratively identify next steps and a plan to implement them.</li></ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

## Core Competency

# Support & Navigation

The continuum of supportive interventions employed by crisis responders during and/or following an interaction. These may include a wide range of interventions, such as follow-up contact, exploring resources, and bridging to other services.

| KEY COMPETENCIES                                                                     | PRACTICE-BASED APPLICATION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>16.0 Support emotional regulation and coping</b>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Apply techniques and strategies to help caller/texter recognize and manage intense emotions.</li><li>• Ask the caller/texter what has supported their coping in the past.</li><li>• Identify states of present distress (e.g., anger, crying, and irritability) and explore additional ways of coping.</li></ul>        |
| <b>17.0 Provide additional resources and/or services to meet caller/texter goals</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider what resources and services the caller/texter may have access to within their community or region.</li><li>• Share resources only once the caller/texter's perspective has been understood.</li><li>• Facilitate a warm transfer for the caller/texter, in accordance with policy.</li></ul>                   |
| <b>18.0 Effectively manage transitions and closures of interactions</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Account for the caller/texter's current level of distress in determining when and how to end an interaction.</li><li>• Ensure there is understanding and clarity about any next steps the caller/texter is going to take.</li><li>• Invite the caller/texter to access crisis services again if they need to.</li></ul> |

## Roles

Roles outline the foundational characteristics crisis responders bring to their practice and to the tasks of the four competency domains.

### Role

## Communicator

The use of active listening and other communication techniques to engage and collaborate with the caller/texter to create a positive and safe space. This includes all forms of communication employed by responders with caller/texters and team members: verbal, interpersonal, and written communication.

- C1** Communicate with caller/texters in a manner and tone that is clear and calm while assessing for caller/texter's understanding.
- C2** Use language translation services as needed to enable communication.
- C3** Guide the interaction to focus on issues of present concern.
- C4** Maintain communication with supervisors and alert them to situations that require their assistance.
- C5** Operate communications technology effectively to ensure seamless and uninterrupted interactions with caller/texter.
- C6** Access electronic database of contact records when needed.
- C7** Demonstrate the techniques and appropriate use of a warm transfer, in accordance with policy and available resources.
- C8** Create an accurate and complete interaction report in a timely manner for each crisis contact.
- C9** Document degree of risk, interventions provided, the nature of the interaction and/or the need for follow up in contact records for each interaction.

## Role

# Professional

The commitment of responders, whether paid or volunteer, to professionalism in attending to the health and wellbeing of themselves, individual caller/texters, and communities through adherence to policies and procedures, ethical practice, high personal standards of behaviour, and reflective practice.

- P1** Exhibit professionalism in all relationships and aspects of practice.
- P2** Uphold the values of non-judgment, respect, and compassion while acknowledging the autonomy of the caller/texter.
- P3** Understand the implications of initiating emergency interventions and/or taking measures to protect safety without the caller/texter's knowledge or consent.
- P4** Understand the need for and limits of confidentiality.
- P5** Identify ethical considerations related to any aspect of service provision, or issues related to death, dying, or suicide.
- P6** Reflect on one's own assumptions, values, and beliefs, and the potential impact on the responder role and on caller/texters. This may include beliefs about death and dying, suicide, and what it means to be in a responder role (e.g., orientation towards "saving" others; limits; heroic efforts; power differential in "helping" behaviour).
- P7** Recognize one's own behaviours and emotions, and the impact of these on the interaction.
- P8** Engage in self-reflection and prioritize personal well-being, acknowledging the influence it can have on caller/texters and team members.

## Role

# Lifelong Learner

The participation of responders in continuous learning to ensure standards of practice, improve personal practice, and contribute to collective improvements in practice. This includes awareness of and adherence to policies and protocols, making use of up-to-date resources, and the best available evidence. This also includes the continuous learning necessary to deliver these services using available and evolving digital technologies.

- L1** Complete and maintain necessary training, professional development and learning activities, and supervision to meet all standards of practice and to enhance knowledge, skills, and proficiency in crisis response.
- L2** Conduct ongoing self-assessment of one's practice and identify opportunities for learning and improvement.
- L3** Use feedback from supervision and/or quality assurance interactions to improve practice.
- L4** Contribute feedback to the quality of services provided.
- L5** Engage in reflective practice by observing and analyzing experiences, actions, outcomes, and thinking critically about perceptions, values, and assumptions, with the intention of improving professional practice and participating in continuous learning.
- L6** Remain up-to-date on current crisis line technology and software(s) needed to carry out end-to-end interactions, including queue management, and response to voice- or text-based interaction.

## Role

# Advocate

Engagement with individuals, families and communities in recognition of their strengths. Advocacy occurs at every level of interaction. This encompasses practicing in a trauma-informed way with cultural humility and self-awareness and demonstrating respect for diverse people and communities. Practicing as an advocate involves the application of equity-based principles and trauma-informed approaches to ensure that crisis services feel accessible and safe for all.

- A1** Recognize the impact of social and health inequities on the individuals and communities in the service area.
- A2** Identify stigma related to suicide and mental health, and work within the responder role to challenge stigma.
- A3** Demonstrate skills in identifying and understanding the diversity of caller/texters, team members and communities, including diversity in culture, religion, gender and sexuality.
- A4** Acknowledge one's own social positioning, values, and biases that have an impact on service provided, and engage with cultural humility
- A5** Apply knowledge of culturally safe practice, including adapting engagement and interventions to the unique needs and values of each caller/texter.
- A6** Engage with cultural humility in order to contribute to cultural safety.
- A7** Understand the prevalence of psychological trauma and its impacts, including the link to suicide behaviour, and apply trauma-informed practice skills to ensure that services feel safe for all.
- A8** Reflect on encounters with caller/texters and understand that the behaviour and needs of a caller/texter may be impacted by trauma.

## Development Team

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