

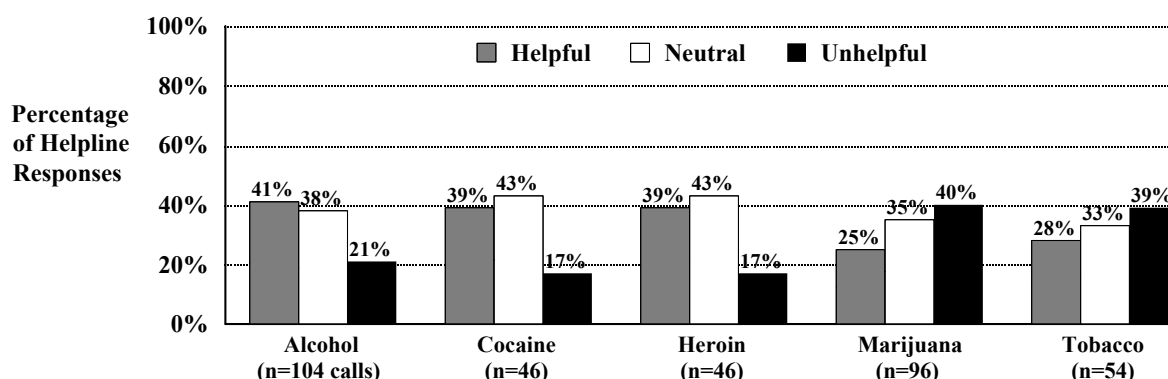
A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

Survey Suggests That National Drug Abuse Helplines May Not Be That “Helpful,” Particularly for Calls Regarding Tobacco and Marijuana Use

A majority of national drug abuse helplines do not provide helpful advice, according to a study of 30 helplines.¹ Between May 1998 and September 1999, researchers called the helplines a minimum of five times claiming to be an alcohol, cocaine, heroin, marijuana, or tobacco user in need of treatment. The researchers used a previously developed script that included responses to anticipated questions. Of the 346 calls, about 40% of the responses to alcohol, cocaine, and heroin problems were helpful and about 20% were not.² Furthermore, only about 25% of the helplines provided helpful advice to marijuana and tobacco problems, while about 40% provided unhelpful responses. The authors note that “physicians, clinicians, administrators, and the lay public need to realize that simple referral to a national helpline for drug abuse problems will often be insufficient” (p. 193). They suggest improving the quality of telephone helplines by setting national standards.

Percentage of National Helpline Responses That Were Helpful, Neutral, or Unhelpful, by Drug Problem Presented, 1998-99



¹The national helplines were from a list published on the Public Broadcasting System website associated with the 1998 Bill Moyers series on drug dependence, excluding those helplines that were not focused on drug dependence. The representativeness of this sample is unclear because there is no national organization of helplines to provide comparative data.

²Helpful responses included sending a helpful mailing or referring callers to a self-help program or drug dependence treatment center. Neutral responses were referrals to another national helpline such that the caller essentially had to start over again. Unhelpful responses were incorrect information, inadequate responses, personnel stating they do not deal with that particular problem although the helpline name suggested they did, or not very helpful mailings.

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from Hughes J.R., Riggs R.L., Carpenter M.J. “How Helpful Are Drug Abuse Helplines?” *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 62:191-194, 2001. For more information, contact John Hughes at john.hughes@uvm.edu.