

9888

SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

Executive Summary:

Messaging and Communications to Trusted Messengers
of People Disproportionately Impacted by Suicide

Research By:



Research
INSTITUTE

In Partnership With:



Since July 2022, 988 has been the national 3-digit hotline for mental health resources and suicide prevention. Since its inception, 988 has routed over 9.6 million contacts¹. At the same time, 14.3 people per 100,000 died by suicide in 2022 in the United States—more than any other year on record. To address this issue, we must continue to increase awareness and use of 988.

With the nationwide transition to 998, a need arose for 988-specific formative research among groups that are disproportionately impacted by suicide. The formative research seeks to support culturally sensitive, responsive, effective, and successful 988 communications; increase awareness of 988 among groups at disproportionate risk of suicide; and instill trust and confidence in 988 to increase likelihood of use.

The 988 Formative Research Project began in summer 2022, led by the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Action Alliance), the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC), and the Ad Council Research Institute (ACRI), and supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The project fills a critical research gap and supports more informed 988 messaging and implementation efforts.

ACRI's initial 988 Formative Research study was released in late 2023. The inaugural study consisted of qualitative and quantitative methods focused on uncovering the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, barriers, and motivations related to 988 and identifying help-seeking behaviors among populations disproportionately impacted by suicide as a first step in better understanding how to reach and engage them.

ACRI's 2023 study on 988 messaging and communications to populations disproportionately impacted by suicide² focused on eight populations:

- **American Indian/Alaska Native youth and young adults** (ages 13-34)
- **Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) youth and young adults** (ages 13-34)
- **Black youth and young adults** (ages 13-34)
- **Hispanic, Latinae/Latinx youth and young adults** (ages 13-34)
- **Individuals who have attempted suicide or experienced serious thoughts of suicide during their lifetime** (ages 13+)
- **LGBTQIA+ youth and adults** (ages 13-49)
- **People with disabilities** (ages 13+)
- **Older rural men** (ages 49+)

NOTE:

THESE GROUPS ARE THE DESIGNATED POPULATIONS INCLUDED IN THE INITIAL 988 FORMATIVE RESEARCH STUDY. THEY DO NOT REFLECT ALL POPULATIONS THAT ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED BY SUICIDE.

1. <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/988/performance-metrics>

2. Note: In the initial 2023 study, ACRI referred to audiences as "at higher risk for or disproportionately impacted by suicide." For brevity, this has been shortened to "people disproportionately impacted by suicide" in the 2024 report on trusted messengers.

The second study in this project is focused on the **trusted messengers** among populations that are disproportionately impacted by suicide. Trusted messengers are the individuals who people **turn to for trusted, unbiased information and help when they're struggling with their mental health or in crisis.**

Since ACRI began research with trusted messengers in 2012, it has been found that trusted messengers are critical when an individual needs an unbiased, trustworthy source—for resources, help, and more. In the inaugural 988 Formative Research study, participants indicated that when they're struggling with their mental health or are in crisis, they most often turn to their **spouse/partner, mother, siblings, and friends** for help and advice. These trusted messengers are also the ones that earlier study groups said they'd most trust information on 988 from, giving them a vital role in helping encourage, recommend, and influence their loved ones/close connections to seek support through 988.

Marketers and communicators must speak to trusted messengers when seeking to increase awareness, knowledge, and use of 988. Because trusted messengers play a unique role in supporting individuals who may be at risk of suicide or a mental health crisis, communicators need to create messaging that builds confidence among trusted messengers so they will use encourage 988 use among their close connections, as well as use 988 themselves for support and resources.

ACRI CONDUCTED QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH TO:

Uncover knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about accessing crisis services among trusted messengers of groups disproportionately impacted by suicide, as well as encouraging use to their loved ones/close connections.

Identify and explore barriers and motivators to accessing crisis services among trusted messengers of these groups.

Inform culturally sensitive, responsive, and effective messaging development to help trusted messengers access 988 as a resource for themselves, or when their loved one/close connection is struggling with mental health or in crisis.

The study's qualitative phase focused on trusted messengers of populations disproportionately impacted by suicide and consisted of 48 60-minute webcam interviews. To qualify for the quantitative phase of the study, respondents must have a close connection to one of the above groups who are disproportionately impacted by suicide. For this phase, a 15-minute online survey (offered in English, Spanish, and Mandarin, the three most commonly spoken languages in the United States) was conducted in December 2023 - January 2024 among N=12,881 respondents to validate findings in the qualitative phase and to understand how to communicate about 988 with the trusted messengers of people disproportionately impacted by suicide.

**KEY INSIGHTS
FROM THE STUDY
ON TRUSTED
MESSENGERS
INCLUDE:**

MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES & CRISIS

The majority of trusted messengers believe they could recognize changes in their loved one or close connection.

Two-thirds or more of trusted messengers across all cohorts said they'd be extremely or very able to recognize if their loved one/close connection was showing changes in behavior that suggest they may harm themselves, slightly more for spouses/partners (75%) and mothers/caregivers (72%) than friends (69%) or siblings (68%).

The top signs among all groups of such a shift include isolation or withdrawing, lack of communication, and a change in mood or behavior.

About a third of participants say they've experienced a mental health crisis with their loved one/connection.

Four in ten (41%) spouses/partners say they've experienced a situation where their loved one/close connection appeared to be in a mental health crisis, as do 36% of friends, 35% of mothers/caregivers and 29% of siblings.

During such a situation, trusted messengers are most likely to say they talked to their loved one/close connection or stayed with them in person, with many also hugging/holding them. Siblings were most likely of the groups to call a family member; friends talked on the phone with their loved one/close connection.

988 KNOWLEDGE & USAGE

Spouses/partners and friends are more likely to be aware/heard of and are somewhat familiar with 988 compared to other groups.

More spouses/partners (56%) and friends (53%) of loved ones/close connections say they're aware of the lifeline, compared to 49% of siblings and 44% of mothers/caregivers. Very few overall say they've used it, however.

When they've heard about it, trusted messengers are most likely to have heard about 988 being available 24/7 and free.

Participants have also heard that 988 is helpful, anonymous, and/or private/confidential.

Most trusted messengers feel 988 is very/extremely valuable, especially people with Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander loved ones/close connections.

Messengers across groups would find 988 more valuable if they knew more about what happens when someone calls, heard personal success stories, knew more about 988's trained counselors, or that information would be confidential. Of all messenger groups, mothers/caregivers found the least value in 988 being endorsed by someone they trust.

Trusted messengers (spouse/partners, siblings, friends) to older rural men 49+ found less value than other cohort groups across a number of factors, particularly if/when it was endorsed by someone they know or if they'd learn about it on social media.

988 USAGE CONSIDERATIONS & INTENTIONS

The majority of trusted messengers would consider using/recommending 988 when their loved one/close connection is struggling or in crisis.

Nearly three-quarters of all messengers said they'd consider using 988 as a resource to get help or support for their loved one/close connection if they were struggling with their mental health or in crisis, even more for mothers/caregivers (76%). More trusted messengers to Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander individuals (across all trusted messenger groups) said they'd be very likely to consider using 988.

Above all, trusted messengers would consider using 988 to learn how to best support their loved one/close connection when they're struggling or in crisis.

More siblings of White (53%) loved ones/close connections and people who have experienced suicidal ideation (53%) said they'd be open to using 988 because they can't support their loved ones/close connections alone (compared to 44% total siblings across cohort groups); fewer mothers of White loved ones/close connections said they'd use 988 to learn more about mental health (28%, vs. 39% total mothers/caregivers).

People who are not open to using 988 as a resource cited a variety of barriers: privacy, potential damage to relationships, and lack of knowledge.

Friends especially, compared to other trusted messenger groups, are worried about how it would impact their relationship with their loved one/close connection (they'd be overstepping, it would be a breach of trust, etc.), or are worried law enforcement would be contacted.

Spouses/partners and friends of someone who has experienced suicidal ideation are more likely than other trusted messenger groups to say they'd be worried about damaging their relationship, that law enforcement would be called, or that responses would be scripted and not authentic.

988 MESSAGING PERFORMANCE

In the study, ACRI tested a foundational message frame (i.e., messaging and narrative concepts used to test definitions of the various language and phrasing) with participants, followed by two conditional frames. The foundational frame provided background, explanatory descriptions, and key attributes of 988 to aid in the basic understanding of the lifeline and its benefits.

The conditional frames were added to the end of the foundational frame to further explain and expand upon it, as well as to address key barriers the research team heard in the qualitative phase (i.e., to overcome objections, perceptions, and/or attitudes toward 988). The two conditional frames were “You’re Not Alone,” a message that reassured trusted messengers that there is help available for both their loved ones and themselves, and “Identifying Crisis,” a message focused on helping trusted messengers understand when to seek help for their loved ones.

Most trusted messengers found the foundational frame extremely/very helpful in explaining 988, though less so for trusted messengers to older rural men 49+.

Spouses/partners, siblings, and friends of an older rural man 49+ were less likely than trusted messengers to other cohorts to choose “extremely helpful;” friends of a Black/African American loved one/close connection were less likely than other cohort groups to say “somewhat helpful.”

Most trusted messengers also said the foundational frame would motivate them to recommend 988 to a loved one/close connection if they were in a mental health situation or crisis, particularly mothers/caregivers.

More spouses/partners and friends of an Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander individual (compared to other trusted messengers) said they’d be very likely to recommend 988 after reading the foundational frame.

When forced to choose between the two conditional frames, trusted messengers gravitated much more to the You’re Not Alone frame than Identifying Crisis.

However, more friends of an older rural man 49+ chose Identifying Crisis than the aggregate (48%, compared to 37% total friends).

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Messaging and Communications to Trusted Messengers of People Disproportionately Impacted by Suicide provides a deeper look into how trusted messengers to populations that are disproportionately impacted by suicide support their loved ones when they’re struggling with their mental health or are in crisis, and how to best develop messaging to encourage use and/or access to 988. Download the report and communications toolkit and learn more at www.988messaging.org/research.