



A Day in the Life of a Counsellor on Duty

Written by Jessica Fischer

A day in the life as a counsellor at the shelter is a complicated one. No two days are ever the same, and the shelter is a place where any and all situations could be called to your attention. Overall, the aim of what I do is to support women and children who have experienced abuse and sexual violence. I work from a feminist, anti-oppressive and trauma informed framework. Our shelter practices harm reduction and we are funded for 13 beds. During my shifts, in addition to supporting women and children staying in the shelter, I offer non-residential counselling, facilitate support groups, and provide telephone support.

Many people understand the purpose of a women's shelter and understand the basics of our programs, but when I talk about where I work I am almost always asked, "so what do you do while you are there all day?" To be fair, this is a loaded question; because there are so many tasks and responsibilities I do, it is hard to explain. With this article, my purpose is to shed some light on what it is to experience "a day in the life of a Counsellor on Duty".

The biggest part of our jobs as counsellors at the shelter is providing a safe place for women and children. When a woman leaves an abusive situation, she is counting on us to keep her and possibly her children safe from her abuser. We validate women and their fears, and our number one priority is her safety. We know that the shelter is likely to be the safest place possible for her. With everything women deal with when escaping an abusive situation, and with the trauma they face and heal from, a safe roof over their heads is not something they should have to worry about. At the shelter, we have multiple

safety measures in place to ensure that women and children using services, as well as staff, feel at ease. Of course, when working in the violence against women (VAW) sector, there are emergency and safety situations that arise. As counsellors, when these situations happen we are prepared and, when necessary, we do involve emergency response including Police assistance.

We always complete a risk assessment with women when they first reach out to us. This helps to determine whether a woman is at high or low level of risk while using our services and it helps us to safety plan accordingly with that woman. High risk situations in the shelter cause us to be more vigilant in our day to day work. We watch for unfamiliar vehicles in our parking lot, monitor cameras and take extra precautions when our alarm systems are set off. Safety planning with women is helping a woman create an individual and unique plan for improving safety while experiencing abuse. This may include involving Police, or helping women lay out a plan of how to get to the shelter or protect herself in volatile situations.

Counsellors in the shelter work hard to build connections and provide a high level of support to women at a time when it may feel to her like no one else does. Working to build trust with women is crucial: if we don't make the effort to show women that we care and want to support and empower them, we are doing a huge disservice. As counsellors in the shelter, we do more than just point women in the direction of other service providers. We help women work through their pain, providing a listening ear when

they've been silenced for so long. This involves remaining empathetic and nonjudgmental. It's helping women learn what trauma is, and how to heal from it, day after day. It's the multiple conversations that, over time, allow women to start building confidence and believing in themselves. So much of our work is advocating for women and their children, whether it be with court services, community partners, or other social services. We stand with women and fight for them to get what they need.

As Counsellors in the shelter we are committed to continuous learning; we are constantly engaged in new training and in building awareness. The VAW sector is complex and we want to ensure that we stay up to date with new discoveries, theories and ideas related to trauma, domestic violence, human trafficking and so forth. Working in a shelter requires us to be involved in the discovery of these new ideas, and a part of the service piece to women is helping to educate them with the most up to date information we have access to. We also work hard at staying updated with what is happening in our own communities, and the services other organizations provide. This information is crucial as we help women to navigate various systems. Empowerment is at the heart of the services we offer. Sharing information and making referrals allows women to be resourceful in obtaining what they need for their individual situation.

In addition to providing around the clock support to women in the shelter, Counsellors answer telephone support lines. In the shelter we have three separate phone lines that are available for women to call 24 hours a day. One of these is a sexual assault support line.

To put this into perspective, in 2019 women's house staff provided telephone support on 10,619 occasions to over 938 women. When we pick up the phone, we never know what to expect. We do get calls from community members, concerned family members and friends looking for information, but more often than not, on the other end of the line is a woman with the courage to ask for help. She may be looking for guidance with a safety plan, admittance to our shelter, court support, or housing assistance. She may have just been sexually assaulted and in need of help. Perhaps she is looking for support for a child, or community resources she can use to improve her situation. Some of our callers experienced abuse in childhood or many times over the course of their lives and continue to work through the impact of what they experienced. Whatever the case, we try our best to fulfill those needs and provide as much information and support as possible. When we end those calls, we may never hear from her again and may never know what happens. We trust that we have done everything we can to give her the information she needs and tools to make change. Unfortunately, sometimes it's the not knowing that is one of the hardest aspects of our job. We've provided as much help as possible, and then we are left with the unknown. Did she leave her partner safely? Was she able to secure a lawyer to protect her children? Was she able to access the places she needs, or is she still stuck in her current situation? There is a heavy wave that you feel when a call full of chaos ends. It takes a lot of self-care and understanding to learn how to deal with that wave and live with it in a healthy manner.

The truth is, those of us who work in the VAW sector hear horror stories. Things you might only hear about in movies and you don't think can happen in your small home-town community. The horror of violence and abuse happen much more than you might think, and in your community. Stats tell us that over fifty percent of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical

or sexual violence since the age of 16. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 10 women are concerned about violence in their homes. It may be a woman you know putting on a brave front, but really hurting behind closed doors. The services we provide are so important. They can be life changing and even a matter of survival.

At the end of our shifts as shelter Counsellors, when we've worked twelve straight draining hours, fighting the good fight, we must work to practice self-care and take care of ourselves. We go home, we share time with our loved ones, read a book, take a bath, and maybe even cry a little. We fight for women consistently; if we don't take care of ourselves, we risk burnout. Compassion fatigue is a very real and dangerous thing that shelter workers can experience. Abuse against women and children can't be sugar coated: it's a difficult subject, multifaceted and complex. Often times it feels like we are spinning wheels and getting one step forward and two steps back. But we do it, because we believe in a better world for women. One where they can be free from abusers and have a sense of control, dignity and safety in every life situation. The real win is empowering women and witnessing women make positive changes in her life. The reward comes when women update us months or even years later and tell us that we had a part to play in saving their lives. This transformation makes the hard parts of the job completely worth it. And it's these success stories that help us persevere; help us to get up day after day and fight again. For the war isn't over yet and there's so much that still needs to be done.

We urge you to support your local VAW shelter in your community be it through supporting an event, donating or spreading information. Without your support VAW shelters cannot survive. The funding we receive from the Provincial government through the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services and Ministry of the Attorney General is never enough. We rely on donations to ensure all programs can run with the standards we have set for ourselves. In order for Women's House to continue to operate all of our services, we need to fundraise approximately \$150,000 each

year. That number seems astronomical and impossible. But, when everyone gives a little, the women in our community receive a standard of service that is unmatched. In working to become involved, we also urge you to please speak out about issues of abuse and sexual violence. Work with us to share information about our cause and our programs. We must work together, because when we lose these resources, women lose their safety. Women lose the opportunity to escape an abusive situation. Women lose the opportunity to stay alive.

In 2019, Women's House provided service to 938 women and 224 children, and fielded 10,619 crisis and support calls.

Our services are available free of charge.

If you are a woman in crisis, please call our 24-hour crisis or sexual assault support lines to speak to a counsellor.

Toll Free Crisis #: 1.800.265.3026

Local Crisis #: 519.396.9655

Sexual Assault #: 1.866.578.5566

Website: www.whsbg.on.ca

Facebook: [@WomensHouseServingBruceGrey](https://www.facebook.com/WomensHouseServingBruceGrey)

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