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Jaguars exec: Volunteering with a crisis hotline helped me find purpose, saved my life

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Guest columnist

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During a sunny Sunday at the beach, the message I got from my best friend was not one of the puppy pictures or jokes I usually get. Her brother, Chris, had passed from a long-standing battle with drug addiction. While I always knew losing him was a possibility, the weight of the sadness and defeat hit me harder than expected.

I stood up, walked the beach, cried for hours and booked a one-way flight home. I didn't know how, but I wanted to help his family with whatever they needed as they

buried one of the most kind-hearted people I've ever known.

After supporting his family through the funeral, I could not shake the feeling that I had somehow failed by not having the tools to help him. I had to do something in response: I became a volunteer with Crisis Text Line and vowed to learn how to help people with mental health challenges.

School has always come easy to me, but the 30 hours of Crisis Text Line training was a challenge. The topics can be heavy, and the training uses vocabulary most people shy away from: suicide, eating disorders, domestic violence, substance abuse. The difficulty made me realize that I was learning something new and important — the most effective way to express empathy and de-escalate.

My instinct was to provide advice, but I learned how to listen, and how to guide them to a place of calm while offering resources.

Having a structure and tools gave me a newfound sense of preparedness when dealing with heavy topics. I felt ready (though scared) the first time I got on the platform to counsel. I wasn't sure if I would really be able to help anyone. But I was driven by a new mission — that no one who ever crosses paths with me feels alone when they are struggling.

Volunteering on the platform helped me develop a comfort level of helping people in states of crisis that I never had before. I found myself using the skills I learned more and more in everyday life. I was helping colleagues and friends work through depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and relapses into substance abuse.

Helping others is one of the greatest privileges in my life. But more so, one of the most critical things I learned during crisis counseling training is the importance of taking care of oneself. Once someone is already in a state of crisis, it can be difficult for them to think clearly and identify healthy coping mechanisms. I learned this the hard way.

In 2021, while asleep on my couch, a man broke into my house. I woke up to him

hovering over me, blinked a few times and realized that this was not a normal situation. I punched him in the throat, ran outside and called the police. I vividly remember thinking that I needed oxygen, to control my breathing and hear my favorite songs. I also needed to do something to keep people safe.

After the police left and I was alone, I called my best friend at 2 a.m. She answered. My trembling body immediately felt anchored, and I managed a few fitful hours of sleep. I also made it to a previously scheduled morning meeting the next day about a colleague with substance abuse challenges.

The police called as I was walking into the meeting; the man who broke in was apprehended and had confessed. They asked me to confirm who he was and to gather a few things. Before leaving the office, I noticed that because I was open about what happened, certain people were unnerved — other women in the office were rattled about their safety.

I realized part of my healing would require putting others at ease, but I also knew I had to address both my own emotions and other people's responses.

It was impossible to predict all the ways my body and mind would react. My body shook for two weeks. I needed to take more breaks while working. I listened to music with a consistent tempo so I could regulate my breathing. I walked for hours and hours absorbing the sunshine and listening to the waves. I was diagnosed with anxiety and PTSD.

Thanks to my training, however, I know to check in with myself when my heart is racing and how to calm myself down, through the healthy coping mechanisms I identified before my life was threatened. I made lists of things that might make me feel scared or sad and what I would do in response.

Though there are stumbles along the way, I feel comfortable that if someone else comes to me struggling, that I will respond better than I did to Chris, thanks to the training from Crisis Text Line.

I encourage everyone to consider becoming a trained volunteer with Crisis Text Line or to simply learn the basics of crisis intervention. It gave me the gift of surviving that day. I hope no one who meets me will ever feel alone. Crisis Text Line has trained me to do what came so naturally to Chris — to help others feel good about themselves and to remind them how special and loved they are.



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This guest column is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Times-Union. We welcome a diversity of opinions.