

# Who's **listening** when everyone else has gone to bed?

**Katie Endacott**, CEO of Nightline, writes about the crucial listening service run by Nightline – for students, by students

**W**e all know about Samaritans ([www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)), and how important this listening service is to thousands each year.

But do you know about Nightline? This listening service was actually born out of Samaritans, created by students and Samaritans volunteers coming together back in 1970.

The Nightline Association leads a national movement of 31 local Nightlines and 2,000 volunteers. Together, we provide an overnight mental health service for students across the UK. They can get in touch by phone, instant messenger, email or text, ensuring the service is as accessible as possible for those in need.

Every night of term, Nightlines offer students non-judgmental, emotional support when no-one else is around. Nightlines are staffed by student volunteers, who follow the principle, 'We'll listen, not lecture.'

Nightline is a non-judgmental, non-directive, anonymous listening service for over 1.4 million

students across the UK. Each Nightline has an average of 70 volunteers – students who are trained for several weeks before taking calls, have developed the required skills, and have a passion for supporting others.

Students have always faced challenges as they move away from home for the first time, but now they are more likely than ever to experience a mental health crisis. According to UCAS, from 2010 to 2020, there was a 450% increase in students declaring a mental health condition.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the pandemic and the increased cost of living<sup>2</sup> have contributed to a further deterioration in student mental health. In a Student Minds' Research Study, 57% of respondents self-reported a mental health issue.<sup>2</sup>

When students start university, we all know it's a big change. They have to find and make new friends, often moving out of home for the first time, and are finding their feet. Nightline is there to listen when students are feeling homesick and don't want to talk to their flatmates. Nightline is also there when students have a deadline looming and need to talk it through.

## What makes Nightline different?

- Our peer-to-peer listening service is run for students, by students, with callers more likely to be supported by someone with similar life experiences
- Our volunteers are trained in suicide prevention so they can offer vital hope to suicidal callers
- We complement other higher education mental health providers: collaborating with Samaritans to align with best practices, and learning from Student Minds to improve diversity and co-creation
- Nightlines are trusted, and signposted by the NHS on their website<sup>3</sup>
- We support students at scale. The network of Nightlines led by the Nightline Association covers 50% of the student population in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

A report recently released by Professor Michael Sanders at King's College London shows that the incidence of mental health difficulties among

students has risen from 6% in 2017 to 16% in 2023.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the Office for Students has highlighted the value of co-creation with students in developing mental health support.<sup>5</sup> Students continue to value the peer support they receive from Nightlines, whether that be on the phone or through our wider activities, such as exam packs or socials.

As an anonymous, non-advisory service, we provide confidentiality for our callers, except in cases of safeguarding or criminal activity. They can share concerns about their course, their living situation, upcoming deadlines, and health without fear of retribution. Nightlines are there when students don't know where to turn; many feel they will be disciplined or kicked off their course when deadlines loom and their health declines, but Nightline is there to facilitate hope.

One of our callers shared, 'It was helpful to talk tonight. I find Nightline is really good and I feel listened to and not afraid of being judged. I hope this service continues because I prefer it over the other helplines.'

### Why students call Nightline

We collect data on the topics covered in every call, and share these with a Nightline’s institution where possible, to help them understand what their student community is talking about, but perhaps not directly to them. We’ve helped raise awareness about international students settling in, concerns around housing and what information is regularly requested. Institutions have then used these data to improve marketing of resources, adjust plans for settling in, and more.

Interestingly, while students call Nightline to discuss their health and course stresses, they also call about friendships and personal relationships, our fourth and fifth most discussed issues in 2023 (see below). They call to chat on their way home from a night out, to talk about loneliness, self-harm, physical health, and more. We are always developing our database to add new topics – most recently, adding climate anxiety as this increasingly comes up in conversations.

#### Top 10 reasons for calling Nightline in 2023

1. Stress/anxiety
2. Academic issues
3. Mental health concerns
4. Issues with friendships
5. Issues with personal relationships
6. Loneliness
7. Family reasons
8. Suicidal thoughts or suicide attempt
9. For information
10. Depression



One of our volunteers said: ‘...you realise very quickly that every call matters because when you are there for someone who has no one else to talk to, when you can be a friendly ear to the friendless, for the frightened, the lost, the happy, the hopeless, the tired, the calm, the philosophical, the angry, the abused, the ashamed – because then it doesn’t matter that it’s 4am, because being there for someone is timeless, essential and amazing.’

While we started in 1970, we’ve been on quite a journey since then, with the most recent changes being the employment of two full-time staff and the refreshing of the Nightline Quality Standards that each Nightline must adhere to. Nightlines will always look to develop to meet the needs of today’s students. As volunteer numbers continue to be a challenge, we are always looking for new students who would thrive in this opportunity. We are working alongside many others, and are proud to be part of a holistic approach to supporting students during their university journey, ensuring they feel heard. ■

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Katie Endacott** is CEO at Nightline Association, joining the team in 2023 with 15 years’ experience across the charity sector. Katie is part of Advance HE’s Mental Health and Wellbeing in Higher Education Executive Committee and, like many, has lived experience of mental health. <https://nightline.ac.uk/>

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