

## MoS Rapid Response Transcript – Nancy Lublin

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**NANCY LUBLIN:** We've always thought of ourselves as a data first company and we collect, store, and analyze everything in real time to make us faster and better – and, we hope, to make the world a lot smarter.

Now we're handling more like 4,500 conversations a day.

The 15 top states with COVID-19 positives are the 15 top states where we're seeing mentions of it and we're seeing a lot of anxiety.

Bad words that were showing up at first were intense anxiety: “freaked out”, “panic”. But “mom”, we've come to play, “mom”, mom is here. And I'm laughing cause I'm so relieved as a mother.

I work with the best people in America – and they're volunteers. They are taking that pain and turning it into love for strangers.

You can never go wrong with kindness. I make hard calls all the time, but I'd like to think that I do them with kindness, and I think you can't go wrong that way.

Yeah. I mean, Bob, I'm talking to you on Zoom. I'm not wearing pants. This is like a pants-optional moment.

### [THEME MUSIC]

**REID HOFFMAN:** Hi listeners. It's Reid. We're continuing our special coverage and today, we're thrilled to have [Nancy Lublin back on the show](#). Nancy is a serial entrepreneur, and the founder and CEO of Crisis Text Line, which provides immediate and completely confidential crisis counseling via text.

Nancy has seen a surge in calls in the last few weeks, and she and Crisis Text Line are using the data from those calls to piece together the story of what's happening now. She's also thinking about what comes next: for non-profits, and for all of us.

She's interviewed here by former *Fast Company* editor in chief, and Masters of Scale editor-at-large, Bob Safian. As always, I'm grateful to him for stepping in to do these interviews when my schedule won't allow it.

Bob, I'll hand it off to you.

**BOB SAFIAN:** I'm Bob Saffian and I'm here with [Nancy Lublin](#), the CEO of Crisis Text Line. The COVID-19 crisis has injected a new layer of stress and anxiety into all of our lives. In founding Crisis Text Line back in 2013, Nancy created a service to help those suffering from uneasiness of all kinds, particularly young people. And since then Crisis Text Line has had a dramatic and positive impact using mobile technology, texting at its core, as well as data science, to provide systematic frontline resources.

And now, of course, that system is in higher demand than ever as our mental health is under assault, alongside concerns about physical health. Nancy has appeared in previous episodes of Masters of Scale with terrific insights. She's always a delight. She is coming to us today remotely from a friend's home in New Jersey, as I ask my questions from my home in New York. Nancy, thanks for joining us.

**LUBLIN:** Thanks for having me.

**SAFIAN:** These are unprecedented and difficult times, where so much is being upended and in [this special series at Masters of Scale](#), we're interviewing founders and operators who are in the thick of things, who have agreed to share their experiences in hopes of helping other leaders. At Crisis Text Line, as I understand it, demand has jumped significantly – and so has the participation of volunteer counselors, which I'd love to talk more about.

You said recently, “We're an empathy company and we're a data company and people need empathy and facts right now.” And that's another topic I hope we can delve into. But first to start, if you can take me back a few weeks. I was looking through your social feeds and it seemed like your conversations went from being pretty normal through most of February to quickly like, virus alert in early March. Can you take me through how things have unfolded at Crisis Text Line?

**LUBLIN:** We're referring to these in waves, “wave one” and “wave two”. So the first wave of volume has been anxiety and you can see mentions, explicit mentions of the word “virus” and the word “COVID” and they mirror the locations where the virus is showing up. So the 15 top states with COVID-19 positives are the 15 top states where we're seeing mentions of it and we're seeing a lot of anxiety.

The second wave we were worried about and predicted and it has in fact started. The second wave is the impact of the virus itself and the impact of the quarantines. So the impact of the virus itself means starting to see the word, see “grief” and “bereavement” as a result of obviously the losses, and the quarantines, you know when you're trapped at home with someone abusive or with dangerous habits.

So the word “home” used to appear in 6% of our conversations, it's now appearing in 14% of our conversations – and that 14% is showing a 2X in child abuse, domestic violence, and substance abuse. The second wave is a whole other panoply of awful

things. That's the impact, like I said of like a reverberation, almost an echo of the physical is the mental.

**SAFIAN:** Wow. I'm looking back and the first words that I remember you talking about with this was the word "virus" came up a lot obviously. And there were words like "mom" that came up.

**LUBLIN:** Oh that was a good word, she's still showing up as a good word. So the bad words that were showing up at first were intense anxiety: "freaked out", "panic", things like that. But "mom", throughout this we've come to play, mom is here. And I'm laughing cause I'm so relieved as a mother. Normally "mom" shows up as a pain point and we show up as a source of pressure, stress, anxiety – all kinds of things.

But right now "mom", everybody wants their "mommy." "Mom" is showing up as a source of solace. People are concerned about their moms, they're turning to their moms, they're living with their moms again. You just want that good thing. So there are some good things that we're seeing in the data, things that work. And right now, "my mom" is one of those things.

**SAFIAN:** You've always tracked or have been tracking words to sort of understand what the larger mood is. "Courage" I know was another word that came up early on. Has any of that stuff sort of shifted with this second wave, that there are different words or things turning in any way?

**LUBLIN:** Yeah, so "mom" showing up, the word "courage" showing up. We're also seeing references to short time periods. So we're seeing it work when you say things like, "What are you going to do tonight to stay strong?" "What are your plans tomorrow to take care of yourself?" So "tonight" and "tomorrow" – it's a big overwhelming thing with a lot of unknowns. And so if you can shrink it into bite size time references, that's showing success too, and bringing people from hot to cool.

Look, we've always thought of ourselves as a data first company and we collect, store, and analyze everything in real time to make us faster and better, and – we hope – to make the world a lot smarter. Policies shouldn't be made based on anecdote. Big decisions about funding and politics shouldn't be based on one story that someone reads somewhere about one family. It should be based on data. There hasn't been real time data. And so we share, we aggregate, and anonymize and you can see the data at [crisistrends.org](https://crisistrends.org). We've been sharing all of these learnings along the way.

**SAFIAN:** Have you had outreach from any organizations that didn't normally reach out to Crisis Text Line in this crisis to try to understand better or is that level sort of part of what's not happening right now?

**LUBLIN:** I would say that there's some good news and some bad news on that front. There's more coordination. There are some new conversations, certainly, that we're

having right now that we haven't had before that I'm glad to be engaging in. You know, we've talked to the White House for the first time and are glad to give them our data and we hope that it's useful in national coordination. And then there's conversations that aren't going on, that are hard and disappointing. There's more fragmentation out there than I wish.

**SAFIAN:** You're not necessarily hearing from every governor's office or every mayor's office or things like that.

**LUBLIN:** Right. But I can't fault them. I mean everybody was really caught by this and the coordination – there's a last mile coordination issue, right, with PPEs and ventilators, and beds. One of the good things that I hope comes out of this, we have been saying for years that we wish that there was an open table for social services. Like the idea that you could even right now probably book sushi wherever you wanted to eat sushi and you could know that you could get sushi, you could get gluten free sushi. I mean, you could get whatever you need right now. You could order it.

But yet, if we need to send you for a hospital bed or for a respirator or for a test, or in normal circumstances, if we had to send you to a youth shelter where there's a bed that would accept a teenager or to get a rape kit or to have a spot in a clinic that would help you get off opioids?

We know where all of those locations are, but we don't know the last mile of availability. There's not the equivalent. And so it's incredibly frustrating to have that be so fragmented. So we send you to Cook County Hospital and maybe they're all out of rape kits, or we send you to the Bowery Mission and then they say, "We don't take teenagers."

So it's really frustrating. And I think that everybody's now seeing that with this crisis and that it's unclear where to send people to get tests, where to send people to get a respirator, a ventilator, a hospital bed. And so there's a need for national coordination of these social services. And I am hoping that that finally gets built – and then I want it. I just want an API. I'll take a freaking Excel spreadsheet. I mean I don't care how. We all need this.

Every social service organization needs, every school needs to be able to plug into that so that when we send people places, we know they can access services. And then think about the story that data would show, like where people run out of rape kits and where there's a shortage of youth shelter beds and things like that. So it's been fragmented for a very long time. I am hopeful – cause I'm just trying to find something to be optimistic about – I'm hopeful that this crisis will lead to greater centralization of social service tracking.

**SAFIAN:** I mean as you say, empathy and facts need to go together and if you don't have the facts, it's hard to provide the empathy to all the places that need it. A week or so ago you posted a chart showing how volumes had shifted, that normally those under 18 were the largest group of folks using Crisis Text Line and that it shifted to be those over 18. Is that trend holding and do you have some idea what that's about?

**LUBLIN:** “The kids are all right” is the quote I've been giving people. Normally 53% of our volume is under the age of 17, and you know what? They are now sleeping, and they're not freaked out about school, and there's no relationship drama cause there's no relationships, and so they're doing better.

Who's struggling right now is the 18-to-34 year olds, the adulting age group who this was supposed to be their big moment. They are now living at home again, some of them are struggling and they're very alone. They're quarantined and single. They're worried about their finances. These are people being laid off or struggling to find a job. And then the age group that's grown the most in the last week is the 44 to 55, that age group. And I don't know Bob, I'm right in there. And I think the reality of this situation is settling in. We're the ones with the older parents who we are concerned about and caregiving for. So there's again, anxiety there and anxiety co-presenting with finances.

**SAFIAN:** That's fascinating. Can you give us some sense of what the scale of use at Crisis Text Line? Like how much it's grown, and then I wanted to ask you a little bit about how you scale in response in a time of crisis like this.

**LUBLIN:** In the U.S. we handle around, I mean it depends. So at one point in time, a week ago we were handling more than 6,000 conversations a day in the U.S. alone. Now, we're handling more like 4,500 conversations a day. It's come back down to a decent level, but that's only the U.S. We hit an all time high yesterday in Canada. Second highest day ever yesterday in the UK, cause we operate in the UK, Canada, Ireland, and the U.S. So in aggregate, it fluctuates. In general, our traffic is up about 50%.

You asked about, well how do you handle that? Right? Like all of a sudden growing 50% or last week growing 100% in two days? It's unpredictable. Essentially we're a marketplace, right? We don't control supply, we don't control demand. How the heck do you grow that?

The truth is I work with the best people in America, and they're volunteers. These are people who have always applied online, gone through a background check and about a 30-hour training, all in their jammies at home on their couches. That's how we were built. That's how we're designed. It's a distributed network, much like Lyft or Uber, but in your jammies on your couch.

And so, much like Lyft and Uber when volume surges, drivers come running, we're the same way except there is no surge pricing. When the heat is on, this community – and we nicknamed them empathy MVPs – they come running. And even though they're probably feeling stress right now too – and I mean they're going through this along with everybody else, but they are taking that pain and turning it into love for strangers. It's, I think, the truest form of physical distance social connection, is what Crisis Text Line is.

**SAFIAN:** And so you have this sort of pool of volunteers that are being more active than they have been before. Do you also see a similar surge in new people wanting to be volunteers? Or how do you cultivate that? Because some people may have more time available in their jammies than they used to.

**LUBLIN:** And we want them! Like this is a phenomenal time to train to be a crisis counselor and we need you. We expect to grow 2X in just the next month. And so we need to grow this supply side. If you've ever thought about volunteering or if you've ever thought about being a crisis counselor, this is your moment. Do it now, please. You can apply at [crisistextline.org/volunteer](https://crisistextline.org/volunteer). You are needed.

By the way, not everybody passes. So like I said, apply online, a background check and a 30-hour training. It's only about 30 to 32% of people who make it through. But if you are one of those, you do this at your own convenience, from wherever you are, with a laptop and a great wifi connection. And like I said, it's strangers helping strangers in their darkest moments. It's a beautiful thing.

**SAFIAN:** I have heard from some other organizations that rely on volunteers of different kinds that in a crisis like this they are sort of tempted to speed up their training policy to make it easier to get more inflow in there. Is that something you talked about? You're shaking your head no.

**LUBLIN:** I mean, we've never even considered it. No, I mean, that's no. I mean, hell no. No, we don't. There's nothing that matters more than our texters having a trained, empathetic, caring person on the other side. Let me go back to the data. So yes, our volume is growing and our crisis counselors are showing up more and they've got what's called higher lift. They're taking more conversations per person also.

But the most beautiful thing is that our satisfaction ratings from texters have gone up. We normally hit about an 85% NPS or an 85% satisfaction. So think about it. Everybody texting us is miserable. You don't write us to be like, "Hey, got a raise today." You know, that's not what happens at a text line.

Think of it as almost like 100% customer service. Everybody's unhappy. So everybody's reaching out to us – and then after the conversation we send out an optional survey and 19% of people fill it out. And we had a study done on imputation that yes that is

statistically significant and representative, that 19%, and typically we get an 85% satisfaction rating from those unhappy people.

Right now we're at an 88% satisfaction rating. I mean just to like benchmark this, Starbucks is 78% and people are literally addicted to coffee. This is an amazing NPS score and no, we're not going to sacrifice that. We do not cut corners, ever. We don't have a double bottom line. I don't have shareholders.

**SAFIAN:** But there's no speeding your way through FDA approval or clinical trials. There's not an equivalent in this area.

**LUBLIN:** No. Our satisfaction ratings have gone up. It's bananas. And our wait times are better than ever. So I'm probably jinxing myself right now. But yeah, we're outperforming on all of our KPIs, all of our key performance indicators right now we're crushing them – and that has nothing to do with me. That is entirely these heroes who are wearing their jammies, not capes, and they're empathy MVPs.

**SAFIAN:** Yeah. Crisis Text Line is not-for-profit and a lot of not-for-profits are around to provide a safety net for vulnerable folks around them. But a lot of them are also under intense new financial pressure, worries about the places they used to get financial support from and what that donor support is going to look like in the future. Is that something you've seen? Is that something you worry about? Is that something you have any advice for other folks who might be in this area to consider?

**LUBLIN:** I mean, in the best of times the not-for-profit business model is horrible. The business model is: "I do great work, please give me money." And that's it. Like there's no return. Maybe you get like a salmon dinner or a tote bag. It is not actually a business model. It's awful. And so to my friends at companies right now, you know, retail companies, restaurants who are struggling and I say, yup, I totally get that. And it's really hard. You at least have something you're selling people.

Imagine running a not-for-profit right now where people are really nervous about finances. No one has extra cash around. And then just saying, "I do great work, please give me money." It's just... if it was a horrible business model before, it's just not going to work. I don't even know what to call it. This is a really interesting time to run a not-for-profit. It's a really interesting time. Charity dinners are dead. Who's going to go? No one's going to a dinner right now. So there's a whole lot of organizations who their spring fundraiser is what kept them afloat.

**SAFIAN:** Is there anything new you're doing to engage with your funders or you know, you just have to keep going along and doing good work and hoping that gets recognized?

**LUBLIN:** Well, fortunately I never counted on a dinner. I hate those dinners, so we don't do a dinner, and I don't do direct mail. We have a small number of high net worth individuals who we've largely counted on, and so we're still counting on them. I also think that we're blessed in that, like I said before, that NPS score is strong and I think there are a lot of people who use our service and then send us checks. People I've never met before, people I've never spoken to and maybe never will, and we get passive income that comes in through the site, which it kind of does two things. It helps us keep going and it also just gives us such an emotional boost. You know when people send you money that you don't even ask for, that's pretty great.

**SAFIAN:** I thought I noticed that you offered Crisis Text Line to help other hotlines, other mental health organizations, even for-profit companies as well. What sort of assistance have you been able to provide?

**LUBLIN:** Going into this already, we had 130 partners, locations and issues, who we have given a keyword to. So for example, the Golden Gate Bridge is the number one suicide location in America. And they called and said, "We think we should start a text line." And I said, "You're a bridge. Just do you and we'll give you a text line."

And so now you can text GGBri for Golden Gate Bridge to our number – and it's plastered all over the bridge. We've done, I think, more than 500 conversations from the bridge. You can imagine those are all high risk and we give them back the data. We have about 130 partners like this. Super important right now.

So locations, text LA to 741741 – Mayor Garcetti has put that all over the buses. He's been referencing us in some of his nightly briefings. We're here to help those Angelenos you know, get through. It's hard right now. A lot of people are unable to cope productively. They're alone, they're scared, they're quarantined in difficult situations. And so we're here for them and then we give LA back the data to let them know here's some locations where things are acute, here's some issues, so they can do preventative work.

Cause my real dream, Bob, would be to go out of business. Have people be happy, first of all. And then if not, have there be the social services and the processes and protocols in place for people to get what they need so they never feel so alone that they need us. I don't think we're going to go out of business. I think I'm in a growth business. I think pain is a growth industry, I think I'm in a growth business unfortunately, but I'd love to not be.

**SAFIAN.** Sadly. You've been an entrepreneur on many kinds of ventures. Do you have advice for business people right now who are struggling with their decisions and what things they could do to limit the mental health impacts on themselves and on those that they work with, layoffs, you know, very difficult issues.

**LUBLIN:** I would say you can never go wrong with kindness. Even the tough decisions that you have to make, I'm not saying not to make them. I'm not wussie. I'm not afraid of making hard calls. I make hard calls all the time, but I'd like to think that I do them with kindness and I think you can't go wrong that way. People will remember that later, even if you have to furlough people or you have to let them go.

One thing I'm grateful for is the kindness shown to me by friends. So if you are an entrepreneur to reach out to other entrepreneurs. I mean, my friends know who they are: Sariah, Gina, Allie Rosenthal. Like there's a lot of people out there, Catarina, a lot of these people have been on your podcast. But I just think to have other people who understand what you're going through matters. You're not really alone. None of us is really alone. It feels like it sometimes, but you're not.

**SAFIAN:** Is there things that you try to do yourself to manage your stress aside from reaching out to your friends? Do you have advice that the rest of us could use to get through these times?

**LUBLIN:** I would like to thank the makers of Nilla Wafers right now, I think that's Nabisco, for getting me through this COVID. I'm going to call it the "COVID 19", which is reminiscent of the "freshman 15." Yup. Nilla Wafers have kind of been my jam.

Also, lately, I've been making Rice Krispies treats and they don't even need, turns out, to go in a pan. You can pretty much eat 'em off the stove with a fork. Maybe don't take my advice or recipes.

**SAFIAN:** But I think what you're saying is take comfort where you can get it in times that are difficult and not hold yourself to too demanding standards when the rest of your life is demanding already.

**LUBLIN:** Yeah. I mean Bob, I'm talking to you on Zoom. I'm not wearing pants. This is like a pants optional moment. I would say if you don't need to be wearing pants right now, don't wear pants. That would be my advice. And for those of you who are exercising your way through this and are getting like abs of steel, well done, well done. I'm going a different direction.

**SAFIAN:** Nancy, I love how in the midst of difficult times and difficult things and all of the things that you talked about – abuse rising and all these other questions all over the world – you manage to keep your spirit and your sense of humor about it, your humanity.

**LUBLIN:** Thank you. I think that's really all we can do. And I do think that's part of the kindness. I think you've got to find the moments where you can laugh and really take them, and find the things that you can celebrate and celebrate them, and just hold on, we'll get to the other side. We will.

**SAFIAN:** Well thank you. Are there any things that we didn't cover that I didn't bring up and ask you about?

**LUBLIN:** There's one more data point that I'm finding that I just find really hopeful that I think shows the strength of people, but in particularly the strength of Asian people that I've found really heartwarming, which is: the number of Asian texters has increased for us, sadly from 5% to over 10%, largely because of bullying and harassment that they are experiencing.

But then we looked at our application data to become crisis counselors, and we noticed that it's gone from 10% Asian to 27% Asian. So Asian people are in pain right now and are turning that into, "Well, I want to become a crisis counselor and be part of a solution, help and love on other people." And I just think that turning water into wine. It's beautiful.

**SAFIAN:** That's wonderful. Well, Nancy, I want to, again, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today. We're wishing you luck and your family luck. I'm Bob Safian. Thanks everybody for listening.

**LUBLIN:** Thanks Bob.