

Essex is the first Nightline to open almost 40 years ago and offers many services, including:

- telephone helpline and email listening
- private drop-in and vast supplies range including emergency contraception, panic alarms, pregnancy tests and make-up remover for those who cry
- a communal drop-in area with tea and toast so students can safely wait for taxis, chat about things on their mind or gather to talk if something universally upsetting happens, such as a student suicide
- separate male and female crash accommodation if a student can't get home safely and camp bed hire
- high dependency room for those who've had too much to drink to recover safely and under supervision

Night in the life of a Nightliner by an Essex Nightline volunteer

Tonight will be my first duty as a Nightline volunteer and needless to say I'm quite nervous! I've completed my training where I learnt numerous skills and did lots of role-plays but I'm still anxious about taking that first call. It's mixed with excitement though as I've always wanted to help and my friends say I'm a terrific listener. I had problems settling in during my first year and know how much it helps to talk things through and feel someone understands and cares, so I'm looking forward to doing that for other people.

My shift begins at 9.45pm and I'm greeted by an executive committee member. We wait for the other volunteer to arrive and grab a well-needed cup of tea. There is always an executive committee member on duty, as well as one who is a back up and can be there in a couple of minutes if required. They are more experienced and are there to provide support and answer any questions. This gives me total confidence.

Once the other volunteer arrives the executive committee member gives us a panic alarm that we keep on our person at all times. She tells me she's never had to use it but means that volunteers are always protected. She gives us a tour of the Nightline flat showing us where important equipment is kept and I'm amazed to find bedrooms, an office, lounge, kitchen, bathroom, listening lounge and a purpose built room for looking after high-dependency callers (often those who have had one or two too many down at the SU bar!). She also updates us on Nightline committee activity and I sign up for a social that's coming up to meet the other volunteers - I can't wait!

We settle down at about 10pm when Nightline opens and prepare ourselves. We have a phone by the side of each of us and open our front door. We play cards, chat and have a laugh which helps to settle me before I get my first call at about 11pm. I muster up all of my courage to take it. I hear a very soft voice on the phone and the caller sounds upset. I reassure him that he can talk to me, confidentially, anonymously and at his own pace and he starts to open up. The call lasts around 30 minutes and he thanks me at the end for listening to him. It's a strange feeling - proud of having taken my first call and managing to help someone. The only thing that bugs me is that I will probably never know what decision he makes.

We take it in turns to deal with drop-in callers as they wait safely for taxis or want to chat about things on their mind and I think it's fair to say that a MASSIVE amount of tea and toast is served - it was very popular, especially since it was raining. I get to use the computerised system to hire out a camp bed and give out some emergency condoms (I think the caller was impressed by our range!). My colleague sells a pregnancy test to two ladies and then takes a drop-in crisis listening call for an hour. It's a difficult call with upsetting content and afterwards she really benefits from the support of the other Nightline volunteers to reflect on how it's made her feel, distance herself from it and feel at ease again.

What happens next shakes me a little. Security bring in a girl who is very drunk. Apparently a guy was saying that he was a friend and would take her home but security had suspicions that he wasn't so bought her to Nightline for safety. I hate to think what might have happened

to her if they hadn't. With the help of the executive committee member and the other volunteer we manage to get her into our special room with plastic sheets and flooring. We put her in the recovery position (which I manage to remember from First Aid training!). We monitor her condition regularly throughout the night and apply a rota for staying awake. I was told that we usually get about 4 hours of sleep on duty but when we have drop-in callers we must be awake.

At 7.30am we wake up our high-dependency caller who is slightly confused as to where she is and appreciates the tea and toast we make for her. We explain what happened and she thanks us greatly for keeping her safe.

The duty ends with a debriefing session to discuss any issues that may have arisen. I have to say that I really enjoyed my first duty and can't wait for my next one. It was surreal to spend ten hours with people you've never met and get on so well. Meeting such incredible and interesting people was certainly a highlight - I think I've found myself a couple of new friends now. It was challenging, exciting, rewarding but a little tiring the next day - I'm having tea and toast withdrawals as I write this!