

# Chat help: strengths and weaknesses



# Characteristics of the chat medium

- ◉ Channel reduction:
  - Just signs and symbols, moving on the screen
  - The listener's eye (instead of the listener's ear)
  - No voice, no intonation, no expression, no tears, no smell
- ◉ Anonymity: 'chat is faceless'
- ◉ Disinhibition: intimate outpourings in a very short time
- ◉ Placeless: the chat caller can chat from anywhere
- ◉ Communicating in silence: no need to formulate, to express, *"they can't hear me crying"*
- ◉ The therapeutic effect of screenwriting
- ◉ The phenomenon of 'multitasking', influencing the tempo
- ◉ Internal pacing: the need to control the tempo of reading and writing

# Strengths and weaknesses

## ⦿ Low threshold:

- new target groups, such as: persons with a stigma-fear, lonely people, high educated persons, women, mentally and physically challenged persons

## ⦿ High threshold:

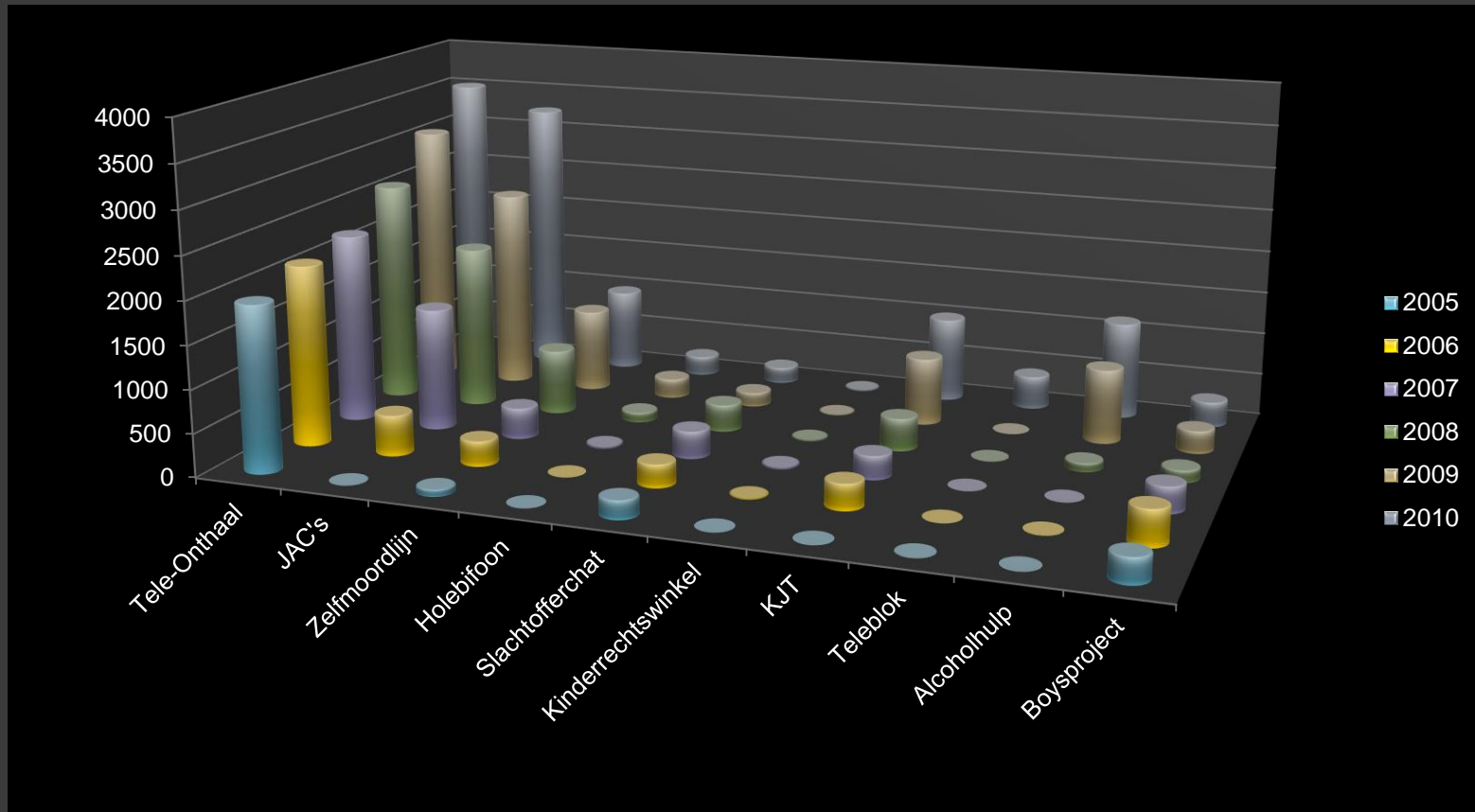
- an obstacle for persons with dyslexia,
- illiterate people,
- persons not speaking the local language
- persons with little or without digital competence:
  - Technical-instrumental;
  - strategic;
  - interactive competence

# Doing research on chat help

- ⦿ Artevelde University College Ghent exploring the online area in primary care
- ⦿ OHUP: Online, Help, Uitwisseling (= exchanging) Platform
- ⦿ Research question:
  - “*we have some experience with chat help but we need a theory and trustworthy knowledge*”
  - They expect **evidence based knowledge**



# Number of chat help talks

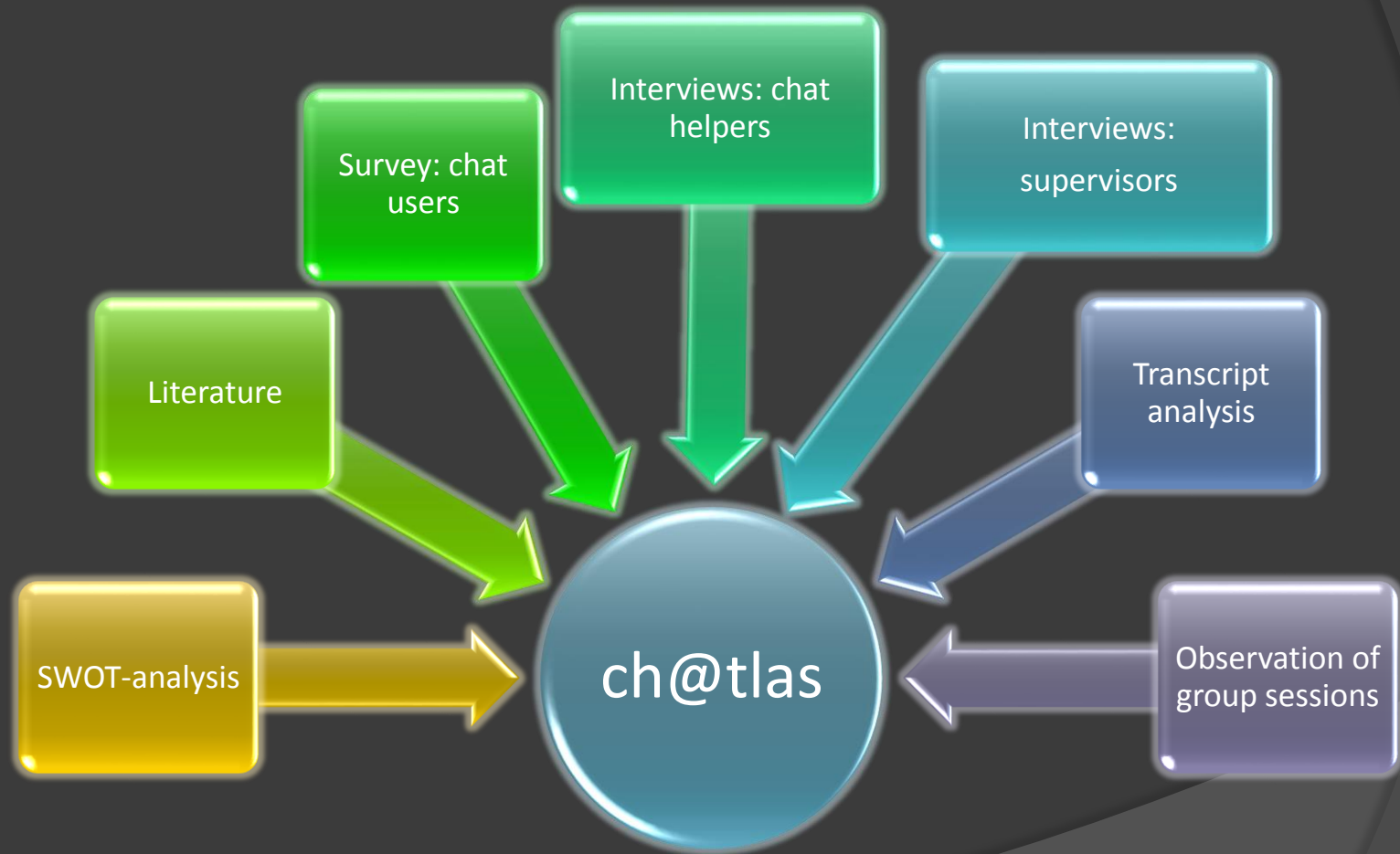


from 2.521 (2005) over 6.349 (2008) till 10.998 in 2010

# Ch@tlas a research product

1. From research to method
2. From practice to education
3. The structure of Ch@tlas
4. Method: a structure in length
5. Method: a structure in breadth
6. Method: a structure in depth
7. Tensions & paradoxes

# Ch@tlas – based on research





chathelp: vision and position

Structure

in length

in breadth

in depth

A method in progress

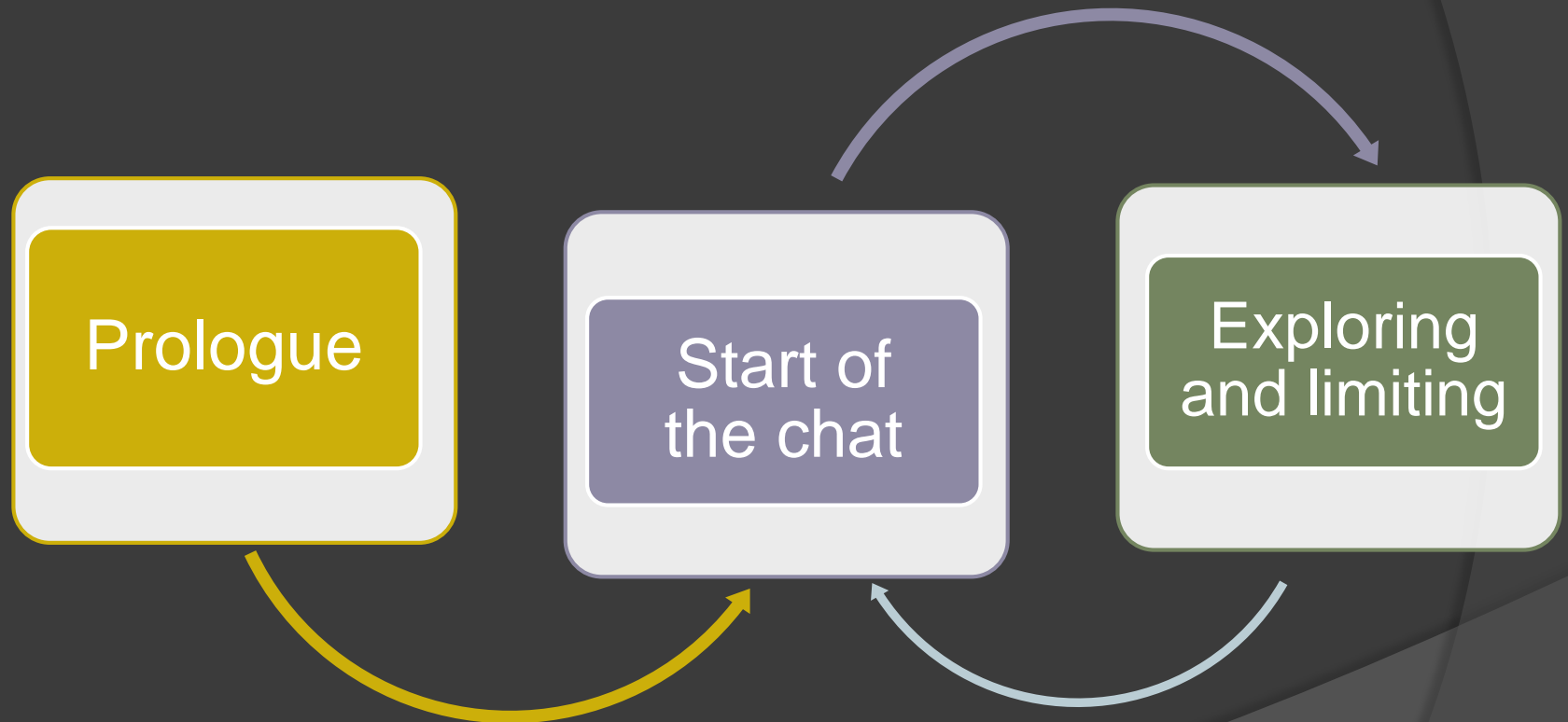
Paradoxes

Ethical  
questions

Further  
research

vocabulary

# Ch@tlas ... structure in length several phases in chat



# Prologue

- ⦿ The phase between the log-in and the start of the chat
- ⦿ Essential: the website has ...
  - to offer necessary information on chatconditions and rules (anonymity)
  - to reduce the threshold
  - to explain clearly the way to go from the log-in to the start of the chat

# Prologue

- ⦿ Recommendations for the website:
  - Low threshold? Attractive for the customer?
  - Layout: sober and clear?
  - Information about the waiting time?
  - Link with signal to the chatroom?
  - Information about online resources and services
- ⦿ Recommendations on basic information
  - Info about guarantee of anonymity
  - Info about the limited time of the chat
  - Make a FAQ
- ⦿ Recommendations on the application
  - The caller is asked to enter a nickname
  - Offer the caller the opportunity to formulate the question/problem

# The start of the chat

## ◎ Chat start =

- introduction, welcome, making acquaintance
- an open and invited question
- the first description of the problem, question or need

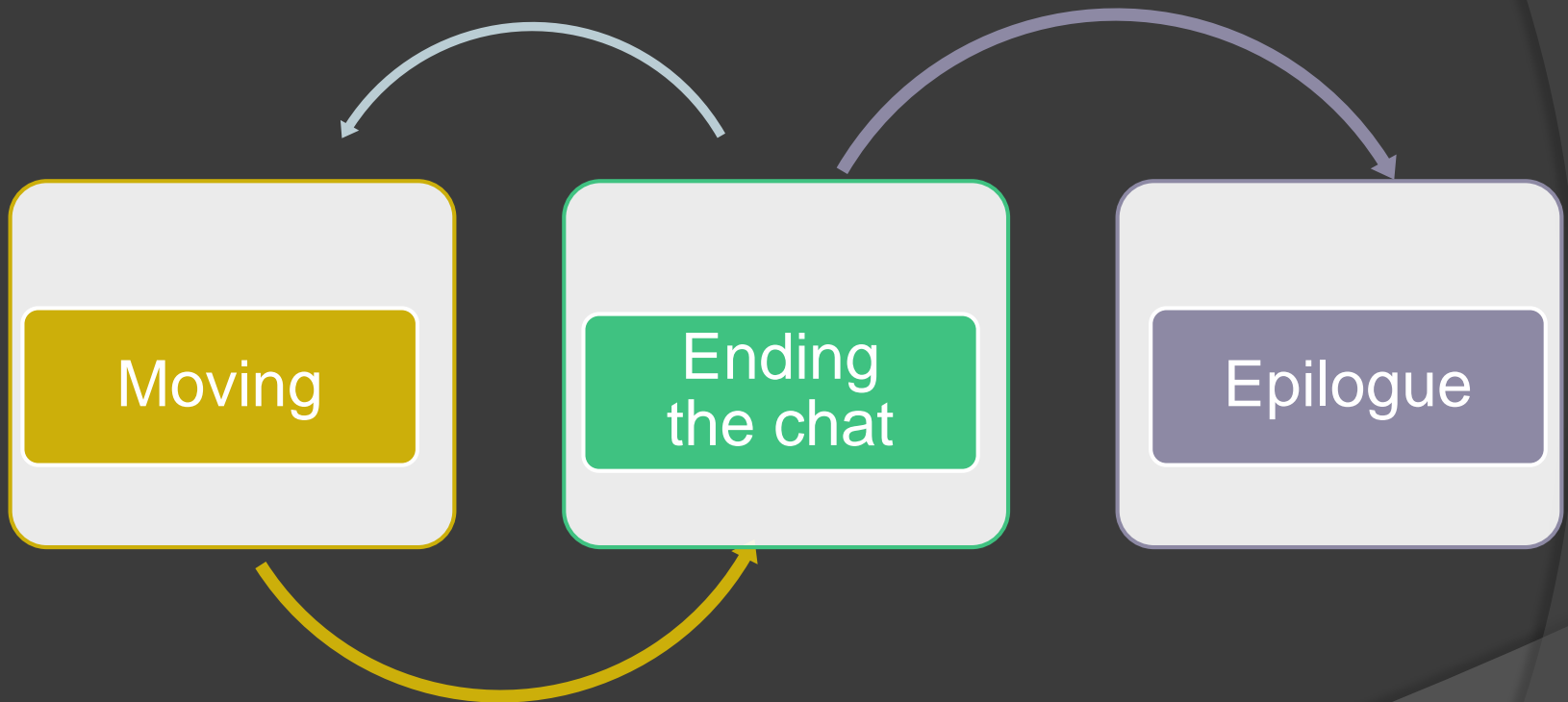
## ◎ Recommendations:

- the chat replier initiates
- offers a warm welcome
- immediately makes use of the nickname of the caller
- recognizes the first description of the problem
- considers the utility of standard questions

# Exploring and limiting

- ⦿ The need of the caller has to be explored and limited
- ⦿ Recommendations:
  - give the caller the opportunity to focus
  - be aware of the tempo of the disclosure
  - check again and again if the problem or question has been correctly understood
  - refrain and control the inclination to offer immediate solutions
  - ask helping questions in case of under disclosure and temporise in case of over disclosure

# Ch@tlas ... structure in length several steps in a chat



# Moving

- ⦿ No solution, no profound change,
  - Only a slight modification in the visible signs, symbols and tempo
- ⦿ Possible methods to achieve 'movement'
  - Give personalised information
  - Give support, develop a chat alliance
  - Introduce another perspective on the problem
  - Refer to other (online) services
  - 'chatter chat': 'small talk' but pay attention to the mandate



# Ending chat

- ⦿ Announcement of the ending of the chat
  - by the caller
  - by the replier
  - by the organization
- ⦿ Recommendations:
  - notice repetitions
  - be aware of circular reasoning
  - offer the opportunity for reflection and feedback
  - check if the chat brought 'rest' or 'enlightenment'
  - tell the caller that he can finish the chat

# Epilogue

## ⦿ Epilogue =

- A phase in which the caller as well as the replier are given the opportunity to evaluate and register impressions insights and signals, in order to optimize the chatservice

## ⦿ Recommendations:

- Create a dropbox for the caller
- Stimulate the caller to send reflections by email
- Ask questions to evaluate the ending chat
- Write a reflection report for intervision or supervision

# ch@tlas... structure in breadth

## the actors in a chat



### The chat caller

- The nickname
- Under- or over-disclosure
- The context



### The chat replier

- Nickname and chatalliance
- 'I' or 'we' or 'the team'

# The chat caller

- ⦿ The nickname
  - Mary
  - An emoticon
  - A problematic term: e.g. 'depressed'
  - An initial
- ⦿ Information about the age
- ⦿ Information on gender
- ⦿ Information of the context

# Who are the chat callers?

## Research results:

- 416 callers: 1/3 of all callers between feb - may 2008
- 80% women
- 70% younger than 25 years, an average age of 23
- 43% already knew the website + 27% 'via Google' + 18% via other channels such as school
- 9/10 used internet daily
- 45% got an immediate account online,
- 38% reported chat room occupied
- 9% : mentioned a technical default
- 13%: was not alone during the chat

# Chat callers reported ...

- ◉ *Having made use of chat service, for the second time, twice positive experience. Difference noticed between persons used to chat and unpractised persons: less practised persons waited longer before giving answers. No problem as such, but sometimes a bit irritating. Furthermore: sincerely thank you!*
- ◉ *"No complaints today. But it doesn't happen often that I seldom can log in immediately. I always have to wait for half an our en even then I can't log in. That's a problem. Apart from that I think it's OK. "*
- ◉ *"I appreciate that I can communicate anonymous and that I get a lot of information on the question I ask. "*
- ◉ *"The replier was too silent, wrote very little ... I wrote ok. Without answering he suddenly broke off the communication. That was rather disappointing. We had been chatting for a short while, I thnink about 15 minutes. Looking back I think the replier was couting down the time. It's a pity because making a phonecall is impossible for me. Thank you very much "*

# The chat replier

- ⦿ A nickname
- ⦿ The real first name
- ⦿ The name of the organization
- ⦿ Information about the expertise
- ⦿ Information about the age
- ⦿ Information about gender

# Chat repliers report ...

*At first I sometimes panicked. I am much quieter now and the conversations are totally different now.*

*"Your senses focus online... I try not to imagine a face. My work as a volunteer on the phone, helps me to realise that there is a human being on the other side of the line."*

*"Chat is totally different. I have difficulties with the lack of nonverbal communication online."*

*"Online is special because you have to write and to formulate something. The other one must do that as well. That is fascinating. It is important that you don't keep yourself too much at a distance."*



# ch@tlas... structure in depth using chat skills

## Screenreading

- What do you see?  
Words, signs and symbols
- How do you assume?
- What is invisible?

## Screenwriting

- How do you write?
- Which signs or symbols do you use?
- How to emphasize
- How to express ?

## Conversational skills

- Active listening: 'mmm'
- Questioning
- Summarising
- Helping to structure ...

# Daily practice : chathelp

- ◎ **organization**: hello and welcome
- ◎ **Marie**: difficult to start. Been waiting one hour to talk to somebody, glad it's 7 pm
- ◎ **organization**: just tell what you have in mind

# How this chat continues ...

- ⦿ Marie: feel frightened
- ⦿ Marie: afraid for calls coming in, afraid that they'll knock again on the frontdoor
- ⦿ Marie: : I just don't know what to do. I feel like hurting myself = going to the railway.
- ⦿ organization: .....

## ◎ Diversity of responses

- (one blank response)
- 7 supporting responses
- 12 exploring responses
- 3 mixed responses:
  - Support and solution
  - Support and exploring

## ◎ Diversity of responses

- Rather large responses  
>< very short responses
- Face to face language (fe. Speak to me)  
>< chat language (fe. I read ...)

## ⦿ Examples of support

- No reason to be frightened – now we chat
- I can read that you feel very frightened

## ⦿ Examples of exploration

- Railway ?
- Are you alone or is there somebody with you ?
- Why do you feel this way? Is there something upsetting you ?
- Why are you frightened ?
- Mary, can I ask you some questions ? Who will call you ?

## ◎ Examples of mixed responses :

- Are you alone ? Can you call somebody ? If not, call me at ..... Can you tell me more about your situation
- OK calm down and tell me what exactly is the problem so that I could help you. You're not going to solve anything going to the railway and hurting yourself

# Screenreading and screenwriting

- ⦿ Language
- ⦿ Text
- ⦿ Signs
- ⦿ Tempo



# Language

## Characteristics

- ◎ Chat callers and chat repliers use a different language / grammar
- ◎ The grammar is influenced by the dynamics and the tempo of chat conversations (aim: to gain time)
  - Shortening words: vowels and last letters disappear ...
  - Using abbreviations e.g. BRB (be right back)
  - Shortening sentences
  - Typing a lot of (writing) errors
  - Using smileys
  - Slang and youth talk

# Language

## Recommendations

- ⦿ Don't copy the callers grammar: use an informal spoken language in a 'written' form
  - You can take example from some of the callers words are expressions but do not exaggerate
  - Try to make connection but stay authentic in your language use
- ⦿ Tempo is crucial – no need to correct all writing faults.
- ⦿ Use (punctuation) marks or smileys to add extra meaning to messages
- ⦿ Pay attention to sudden changes in tempo or text  
Is the caller angry, upset, sad or desperate ?
- ⦿ Help to structure , using lasso's and one-message sentences

# Text

## Characteristics

- ⦿ What is said/written, stays on the screen
  - You can scroll through the text
  - You can refer to something that is written before
- ⦿ Mixed messages

Sometimes a message comes in while you're typing ...  
... storylines get mixed
- ⦿ Lasso

When an enter is used to divide a long message into smaller parts

# Text

## Recommendations

- ⦿ Help to structure
- ⦿ Mixed messages  
Ask for clarification if something is not clear.
- ⦿ Lasso  
Divide long messages in smaller parts so the caller doesn't have to wait too long for your reaction  
Lasso help to put structure in your message.  
One message = one sentence !

# Tempo

... is influenced by:

- ⦿ Length of the messages
- ⦿ Speed of typing
- ⦿ The interval in between the messages  
(passive rest)
- ⦿ Active rest by '...' or by empty messages
- ⦿ Punctuation
- ⦿ Lasso

# Tempo

## Recommendations

- Type fast
- Use abbreviations ( *idd / indeed, OMG / Oh my God*)
- Use short sentences
- Use lassos to split long messages
- Don't correct all spelling mistakes. Use \* if necessary
- Send a question mark ? in case it takes too long before you receive an answer
- Use sounds ( *hmm, aah, ok*) and smileys to express
- Don't lose time writing harmonious phrases

# Non verbal communication

- ◉ Marie: ... than she told me to go away
- ◉ Marie: than SHE told me to go away
- ◉ Marie: than she told 'me' to go away !?
- ◉ Marie: than she told me to ... 'go away'
- ◉ Marie: than ... she told me to go away :(
- ◉ Marie: THAN SHE TOLD ME TO GO AWAY !!!

# Signs ... non verbal communication

Emotic😊ns

CAPITALS, nooooooooooooo “ “, !!!

Abbreviations

Sounds ‘hmm’, ‘waw’

??? en \*

Empty messages, pregnant pauses ...

Chatlas

- description
- function and effects
- tips
- 4 steps to handle signs
- FAQ's about handling signs

## Recommendations

- Read the messages carefully.
- Can you discover what's between the lines?
- Ask for clarification if necessary
- Vary in the way you exprese, use words, smileys, signs.



# Signs & symbols - recommendations

- ◎ Develop an attentive 'eye' for signs and symbols
  - Which words are stressed or veiled ?
  - Do they bring a shade of meaning (nuance)
  - When do exclamation marks or capitals appear?
  - Words in between 'inverted comma's' are keywords worth to go on asking
- ◎ Be conscious that it is easy to misinterpret
- ◎ Ask explanation
  - By using one or more question marks
  - By copying the keyword, adding a question mark
- ◎ Try to make 'connection'

# Tensions & paradoxes

## ⦿ The uniqueness of the chat medium is ignored

- Simply transferring the knowledge from face-to-face help: *“the listeners ear”*) to the chat medium
- Blindness for typical online signs and symbols on the screen (*“the listeners eye”*)
- Rigid focus on feelings and empathy
- Referring chat users to ‘regular’ offline services

## ⦿ Chat help is filled with paradoxes

- A close and intimate connection through isolation
- Very anonymous but very anxious to identify the other
- Impersonal but very vulnerable
- A slow speed or a speedy slowness

# Challenges for the future

## ◎ Chat practitioners' need

- A specific language on online help
  - Taking the specificity of the medium into account
  - Making it possible to reflect on their chat experiences
- A need for a specific chat help method

## ◎ Management need

- A checklist on decision making on the implementation of chat help
- An instrument to evaluate the quality of chat help

# Challenges for the future

## ◎ Trainers need

- Knowledge about reading, selecting and using chat transcripts
  - The tricky character of a chat transcript: a handsome and quickly gathered training tool, but from the perspective of a chat professional very unsafe.
- An increasing attention for the chat context:
  - Of the chat user
  - Of the chat professional
- Observing and using the way signs & symbols move on the screen

More information or questions ...

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... and thank you