



News release
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**Maintaining Mental Health During the Sniper Attacks:
A Social-Worker-Turned-Voice-Consultant Provides a New Way of
Participating in Support Groups—from the Safety of One's Own Home**

Telephone-Based Group Communication Provides a Low-Cost/No-Cost Alternative to the Internet—at a Grass-Roots Level—to Relieve Anxiety and Improve Mental Health

*"A Cross Between a Telephone Conference Call and an Internet
Message Board"*

Fairfax, VA - - October 22, 2002 - - A voice-communications consultant with a background in clinical and psychiatric social work is teaching support-group goers in the Washington, D.C., area how to conduct their support groups in a new and unusual way: by using an ordinary voice mailbox as a "voice bulletin board" or "voice message board," and creating a group dialogue through this voice bulletin board.

The new approach was developed by John Craig, MSW, with the help of research faculty at NYU, Columbia University, and UNC-Chapel Hill. It was tested successfully at Cancer Care, Inc.—one of the nation's top cancer agencies. Based in Fairfax, Virginia, Craig formerly held a director-level position at Audiopoint, Inc., a voice-communications firm also based in Fairfax.

Craig's immediate purpose is to give members of support groups in Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., a way of convening their support groups over the telephone instead of in person, so that members can participate from the safety of their own homes. Using this approach, those too anxious to venture out of their

houses will have an alternative way of participating in a support group with individuals from their local area, without their group having to resort to expensive telephone conference calls.

The approach is superior to Internet approaches because almost every support group has members who are not on-line, and these members would be left out of any support-group interaction set up and conducted through the Internet. By contrast, a voice-based group would be almost universally accessible, because almost every American has a telephone—or easy access to one.

In addition, the voice-based support groups Craig has developed are better at communicating emotion than Internet groups, because they create a group dialogue through an exchange of voice-mail messages, not email messages. Thus, the sound and emotional expressiveness of the human voice is fully conveyed—and emotional communication is an important component of any support-group dialogue, especially in the emotionally-charged environment created by the sniper attacks.

The only technology these voice-based groups require (besides telephones) is an ordinary voice mailbox—one which can be rented in minutes from any voicemail company in the local yellow pages, for just a few cents a day. Group members use this single voice mailbox as voice bulletin board for the entire group. Members post and retrieve messages on this voice bulletin board in organized rounds of interactions, according to an easy-to-remember, preset schedule.

The group discussion thus created is as effective as the group discussions conducted on Internet message boards. This approach is dramatically less expensive than live telephone conference calls, which usually cost \$100 per hour or more and are therefore seldom used for conducting support groups.

Craig has named the group discussions created with this new approach "Voice RoundTables." And he has written a free set of instructions that tell anyone how to set up and conduct a Voice RoundTable. These free instructions are available at www.VoiceRoundTable.com.

The instructions also explain how the facilitator of a support group could ask a community center, church, or school to let the group use a voice mailbox on the organization's telephone system—at no charge—to conduct a Voice RoundTable support group. In this way the group could conduct a voice-based group at no cost whatsoever.

Voice-RoundTable support groups could also prove useful during the holidays, when regular support-group meetings are often suspended. And they could prove useful in future high-anxiety situations, whether caused by random violence, terrorist or bioterrorist activities, or other unpredictable events.

As a voice-communications consultant with a special focus on health care, Craig is currently creating blueprints for advanced voice systems capable of hosting Voice RoundTable support groups on a large scale. Such systems will be suitable for use by HMOs, pharmaceutical companies, government health agencies, and other large organizations. However, small groups can conduct Voice RoundTables very effectively today, using ordinary voice mailboxes and the grass-roots approach Craig has outlined in his free instructions.

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Fact Sheet

How a Daily Voice-RoundTable Support Group Might Be Set up and Conducted

During a period of high anxiety, the members of a support group who preferred not to meet in person could become involved in a Voice RoundTable support group in which they could "check in" with each other as often as every single day, if they desired. Such a group might be conducted as follows. Each participant would call the voice mailbox every day, during the day, and record a two- or three-minute message—a message in which they would give an update as to how they were doing and how things were going.

Then, every day during the evening, each participant would call in again and listen to all the messages left in the mailbox that day by all group members. The next morning, all messages would be deleted, and the cycle repeated.

These simple but powerful group "check-ins" could be conducted every other day instead of every day, or they could be conducted twice a week, or once a week—or at whatever frequency the group desires. Each complete round of interaction would give participants the opportunity to do exactly what they do in face-to-face meetings: first, to express themselves, and, second, to hear what others in their group would like to share with them.

The power of these voice-based group interactions does not derive from any complex technology, but from the dynamic human interaction which an exceedingly simple technology makes possible.

How Voice RoundTable Support Groups Could Boost A Community's Mental Health

Americans who regularly attend support groups are often more vulnerable to anxiety than other Americans. These individuals may need their support groups more than ever during periods of high stress—like the period of high stress the Washington area is currently experiencing.

Today, ironically, these people may be the ones most likely to stay at home when their support groups meet, instead of venturing out of the house to attend. Remaining at home, they miss the chance to connect with what may be their most important resource for calming anxiety—their support group—and they miss this opportunity just at a time when their anxiety may be running highest.

If fear keeps individuals in a community from attending their support groups, many of them could experience a decline in their emotional or mental health. Keeping these individuals connected with their support groups would be beneficial to most of them—and to the community at large. Voice-based groups are a way of accomplishing this.

Creating Voice-Based Support Groups Specifically to Relieve Anxiety Caused by the DC Sniper

As the DC-area sniper crisis continues, many school, pastoral, and community counselors are seeking to calm the anxieties of individuals who for some reason are especially fearful in this threatening situation. Many of these individuals may be very reluctant to travel to any support group or discussion the counselor might want to conduct.

Conducting such a group discussion through a Voice RoundTable, however, could be an effective solution.

How Voice Roundtable Support Groups Can Be Especially Helpful to the Elderly, the Disabled, Individuals with Low Incomes, and Children

The elderly and the disabled may feel especially vulnerable in the current crisis, because they can be slow-moving on sidewalks, in parking lots, and getting in and out of cars—especially if they are ill, are in wheel-chairs, or use walkers. These individuals may feel that they are easy targets for the sniper and may therefore feel inclined to stay at home instead of going out to a support group. They may thus find Voice RoundTable support groups highly appealing.

Low-income individuals may also find voice-based groups especially useful. People with low incomes are often dependent on public transportation, including buses. As the attacks continue, those waiting at bus stops may feel especially vulnerable, because they represent non-moving targets for the sniper. But involvement in a Voice RoundTable support group will not require anyone to wait for a bus.

In addition, low-income and elderly individuals are statistically less likely to be on-line, yet most do have telephones or easy access to them. Thus, these individuals could not conveniently get involved in Internet support groups, but they could easily become involved in Voice RoundTable support groups.

Children could also benefit from voice-based support groups. Many children live in homes without Internet access, or they may not know how to use on-line PCs. But many know how to negotiate the simple technology of a voice mailbox.

Why Simply Encouraging Support-Group Members to Keep in Touch with Each Other by Telephone Is Not a Solution

If members of a support group do not want to venture out to regular support-group meetings, it might be suggested that they simply keep in touch by calling each other on the telephone. But this approach poses a variety of problems. First, many individuals in support groups want to participate anonymously—or, at least, they do not want to give other support-group members their home telephone numbers. And most don't want to have a dozen other individuals calling them at home.

And even if members of a support group were willing to give out their telephone numbers and have other members call them, the many one-to-one calls that group members would make to each other would not add up to a true group experience—communication would be inconsistent, sporadic, and fragmented.

By contrast, individuals involved in a Voice RoundTable support group would never have to give out their telephone numbers. And participants would never have other members interrupt them at home with calls. With Voice RoundTables, all calls are initiated by the members themselves: participants always make calls to the system (that is, to the voice mailbox), and neither the system nor other members ever call them. Moreover, anything shared through the system by one member is consistently heard by all members, creating a true group interaction.

The Advantages for Cell-Phone Users

Voice RoundTables allow cell-phone users to tap into their support-group interaction from virtually anywhere they go—giving Voice RoundTables another advantage over Internet groups.

John Craig's Former Affiliation with Audiopoint, Inc.

John Craig formerly held a director-level position at Audiopoint, Inc., a voice-technology and voice-services startup in Fairfax, Virginia (www.audiopoint.net or www.myaudiopoint.com). Audiopoint was the first firm in the U.S. to launch a nationwide consumer "voice portal" to the Internet. Craig helped lead the design team that developed a wide variety of Audiopoint applications, including Audiopoint's "E-mail by Phone" e-mail reader—an application for reading emails to consumers over the telephone, which Audiopoint has sold to Earthlink and other Internet Service Providers.

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