



## Project Report

# Development of the Chat at Tjeizonen

## Background - The history of Tjeizonen

Tjeizonen is a non-profit association that has no affiliations with a political party or religion. Our target group is girls and women between the ages of 12-25 years. We are a free zone for girls through activities, support and help. We work actively to create an equal society. We work against racism, violence, bullying, oppression and abuse and are open for all girls and young women – regardless of culture, ethnicity, sexuality or religion. Our purpose is to ease and prevent mental ill health among girl and young women by offering the target group a free zone where they can talk with adult fellow creatures.

1998 Tjeizonen started as a free zone for girls, ages 12-25 years. Since then it has evolved into a well functional association where education about conversational methodology and professional conduct together with continuous tutoring of volunteers creates the foundation on which Tjeizonen stands. Today in 2011, Tjeizonen has 200 trained, active volunteers, half of whom 2/3 are working with virtual support sessions via chat, email and Chat- Sister. 1/3 of the volunteers work as Tjeizonen Big Sister offline. Tjeizonen in 2010 had about 10,000 contacts in support activities.

## Project background

Chat activity at Tjeizonen started with Ätstörningszonen (Eating Disorder Zone, aka ÄZ) 2007. After chatting on the ÄZ which proved to be successful, we decided to start another chat; *Öppen linje* (open line) now called *Chatten* (the Chat) which was of a more general nature. Since 2007 we have been running these two different chat lines in parallel, with volunteers trained and coordinated specifically for each chat needs. Initially, 2-3 evenings a week and since the winter of 2008-2009, five nights a week. Thanks to the most recent years of operation, with the support of Allmänna Arvsfonden, the World Childhood Foundation and Stockholm County Council's Health and Medical Services, we now see that we have a very important experience and knowledge of counseling via chat.

We know that there is plenty of good, serious information for young people on the internet. Internet Psychiatry is developing more and more, mainly in the form of cognitive behavioral therapy - which is great! However, there are not many places for more reflective, relational calls in a specialist context. The non-profit world though, such as Tjeizonen, successfully offers these types of calls, primarily to young people. Tjeizonen's chats are part of the non-profit world and represents in that way a kind of transition space where the aid applicants can reflect and draw strength and in that way increase flexibility in their lives.

The purpose of the project has been to articulate and develop a sustainable, quality assured and affordable chat activity as far as possible to benefit the target group, while it also meets the volunteers and the external needs:



## Target group

Tjejzonen is located in Stockholm, but through Tjejzonens chat we reach girls all over the country. Namely girls and young women between the ages of 12-25 years old with mental ill health, social problems or girls that of other reasons feel a need to talk to a trained adult and fellow creature.

Through the internet Tjejzonen get in contact with girls that might never have talked to anyone about their thoughts and worries. Our experience is that many girls experience that they are not taken seriously, not seen or listened to. They often have difficulties to put words to their problem. That the girls can talk about themselves anonymously and try to put words to their thoughts together with an adult creates a basis for possible change. The chat becomes an opportunity and a place where the girls can talk freely about their problems. There are an obvious differences between the girls who seeks contact offline verses online. The girls online have more severe problem with pronounced anxiety and worry.

The ones who seek contact with Tjejzonen via chat:

- Have questions about food, weight and looks
- Questions about relations and self-esteem
- Girls that are debutants in problems concerning eating disorder
- Girls with severe psychiatric problems e.g. self-destructive behaviours
- Girls who prostitute themselves as self-injury
- Girls that are socially vulnerable with bullying
- Girls who live in dysfunctional families with alcoholism, drug addiction and/or mental illness.
- Girls that are exposed to abuse within or outside the family
- Girls who feel alone
- Girls that have questions about sex and coexistence
- Girls with existential questions
- Girls with questions concerning who to turn to regarding specific questions or problems.

During the project the target group have become more and more vulnerable and anguished. Girls with severe problems such as complex self-injury with prostitution, drugs and eating disorder and on top of that thoughts about suicide.

## Activities

Of course it is challenging for the volunteers to meet a target group with such great needs. When the project started we did not know what would come up but we felt that we needed to develop a distinct and transparent volunteering in order to support the target group as professional as possible.

We started with gathering materials such as:

- Read and analyze chats from *Chatten* and *Åtstörningszonen*
- Interviews with volunteers, 6 at *Chatten* and 32 at *Åtstörningszonen*
- Interviews with 10 girls hotlines with chat activity in Sweden
- Interviews and conversations with organizations like BRIS, Save the Children, SKR, ROKS, Red Cross, Public health in Finland, Fryshuset (Nätvandrarna and United Sisters), Anorexi/Bulimi-Kontakt, [www.dinarattigheter.se](http://www.dinarattigheter.se) and [Tjejjouren.se](http://Tjejjouren.se)
- Use current research as:
  - Fukkink & Hermanns 2007 *Children's Experiences with the Kindertelefoon; Telephone Support Compared to Chat Support* Forskningsrapport SCO-Kohnstamm, Instituut, Amsterdam
  - Cecilia Löfberg 2008 *Möjligheternas arena* Dissertation at Department of Education, Stockholm university
  - Cecilia Löfberg 2010 *Creating space Young people's use of the Internet for handling anxieties in everyday life*, Conference paper, Department of Education, Stockholm university
  - Elin Holmgren 2008 *SOCIALT ARBETE PÅ MSN - Ett ungdomsperspektiv*, 15 hp uppsats, Department of Social Work, Stockholm University
  - Lars-Erik Berg 2008 *Vardagsidentitet och skärmdentitet*, article i Tvärsnitt no.3, Research Council, Sweden
  - Elza Dunkels 2007 *Bridging the Distance – Children's strategies on the Internet*, Dissertation at Umeå university
- Use current literature as:
  - Ekeman, Widegren, Kronman, Markström 2010 *Nätvandral! – En instruktion till samtal med unga online*, Fryshusets nätvandrare, Stockholm
  - BRIS-report 2008, 2009 ([www.bris.se](http://www.bris.se))
- Use internet links as:
  - [www.medieradet.se](http://www.medieradet.se) Swedish media council
  - <http://attuttryckadetsvaraonline.wordpress.com/about/> *Att uttrycka det svåra online* A research project at the Department of Education, Stockholm, in collaboration with the Knowledge Foundation
- Participate in the research project *Creating Space: A study of young people's use of Internet forums for articulating their life situations* ([attuttryckadetsvaraonline.wordpress.com](http://attuttryckadetsvaraonline.wordpress.com)) funded by the Knowledge Foundation and is part of their effort: research on young net cultures. Project manager is Cecilia Löfberg, Ph.D., Department of Education, Stockholm University. Partners and sites relevant for the study is Killfrågor.se, Tjejzonen.se and Umo.se The project runs 090401-120601



During and after gathering materials we started to:

- Develop a specific volunteer training for volunteers working with chatsupport.
- Develop the volunteer group through education and then group instruction about 4 times / semester
- Develop a model to organize volunteers working with chatsupport
- Develop a clear and shared approach to the target group that permeates the entire organization

Result:

- A stable volunteer team with professional conduct, capable of handling difficult conversations online
- A specific volunteer training for volunteers working with chatsupport which we now also can offer to other organizations
- A model to organize volunteers working with chatsupport which we now also can offer/share to other organizations
- A clear and shared approach to the target group that permeates the entire organization
- A report about chatsupport; *as writing in a diary that responds* which we have published on [www.tjeizonen.se](http://www.tjeizonen.se) to share our valuable experience about chat support with other interested (see attachment in swedish)
- A conference *Stöd för unga online* (support for young people online) with 200 participants (see attachment in swedish)
- An enhanced and expanded network of experts and professionals

## Objectives/Aims

The project started with a lot of questions. The bigger the activities got and the more difficult problems we faced in supporting activities, the more important it was with a clear and transparent organization. During the development of the chat we faced; rapidly growing business and demand, heavy and severe psychological and social problems. This has led to a need to work together with board and staff for the development of vision: "Tjeizonen will be there and when the girls need us." It has also led us to work with and reflect on the ethical guidelines for the operation.

We have also had networking meetings with BUP (child and adolescent psychiatry), *Socialtjänsten*, *Students health*, UMO (youth center on the web) and KÄTS (*National Center for Eating Disorders*). Also with organizations such as BRIS, *Fryshuset* (*Nätvandrarna* and *United Sisters*), *Anorexi/Bulimi-Kontakt*, *Stadsmissionen* and *Killfrågor.se*.

It has also allowed us to develop and further more help us to articulate our purpose and our strength as a non-profit organization. Something we learned is that networking is more fruitful when gathered around specific issues and problems and we feel our network is valuable because it is where we can interact with experts, health care and associations that conduct issues that we do not, and thus complement and inspire each other.

The difficulties with support calls about mental illness in the chat that we have come across are:

- Difficult to keep the time frame for the volunteer with the risk that the target group cannot trust that the volunteers put adequate limits
- Difficult to endure high anxiety level in the chat as a volunteer with the risk that the target group does not dare talk about their situation
- Easy to feel inadequate and overwhelmed as a volunteer with the risk that the target group does not feel validated and listened to
- Easy to feel anxiousness and dwell on things that come up in the chat after the closure as a volunteer
- Easy to feel frustration as a volunteer with the risk of poorer response against the target group
- Risk of misunderstanding regarding roles and missions as a volunteer
- It's hard to convey humor and irony through chat with the risk of misunderstandings
- Risk being too private with the help seekers as a volunteer with the risk that the target group cannot trust that the volunteers put adequate emotional limits.

How do we get volunteers to reflect on their own experience so that they activate and establish their own professional conduct and deal with the anguished discussions that are on the chat? What has become clear in the project is the purpose of the chat and that the role of the volunteers and coordinator must be distinct. The question: "What is our purpose?" has been central during the project. Some things we found is that it requires:

**Clear objective;** Our vision is to be there and when the girls need us. That means to listen and strengthen them and strive to provide them with greater flexibility in their lives.

**Clear mission and approach;** The volunteers are fellow creatures - not experts, not friends, not therapists, not social workers. Just as the volunteers should be present where and when the target group has the need, the coordinator should be present where and when the volunteers have the need to be listened too, strengthen them and strive to provide them with greater flexibility in their mission. The coordinator should also be adequately trained in mental illness and have experience of supervision and volunteer coordination. The approach should permeate the entire organization to provide long-term sustainability, safety, quality and credibility of the activities.

The results of the project have taught us the importance of rules and boundaries in the work with volunteers and girls on the chat. In order to maintain stability and professional conduct in the chat the teamwork is important. Everyone should have the same approach in the chat and an ongoing reflection and communication about the work, about themselves, with the coordinators and the other volunteers. We think it is absolutely necessary with a staff coordinator who has knowledge and understanding of the target group and its problems. The coordinator has an overview and captures the needs and trends of the girls and specific issues have been raised at group counseling, such as anxiety, suicide, self harm, eating disorders, abuse and social service missions.

The chat has made Tjejzonen to become a voice for the girls: Conferences on current topics (eating disorders and self-injury) in the chat has been offered to pupils' health, etc. and filled a great need for them according to our assessments. The topics we meet in the chat appear also at pupils' health, youth services and others who work daily with young people. The girls convey to us what are good and what they lack in their life and in that way we are also a voice for our target group.



The project has also led to new projects such as:

- Project *Systerchatt/ Storasyster på nätet*, for girls in need of a continuous relationship.  
- Project Summer chat, for girls in need for support calls when health care and schools are taking holidays and summer vacation.

- Different chat tools for different audiences; *Ålstörningszonen* uses MSN (Windows messenger) as it seems that it is perceived as easier and less distressing way to connect for many of the girls who have problems with eating disorders: "I have really no problem, just a little problem with the food ... I can wait if you don't have the time." *Chatten* uses chat through the website, because there are more girls who turn to *Chatten* and therefore require a good queue system, but also because the girls have need of more attention, for example: "I've aaaaanxiiiiiiety! - Help me !!!!! Hello !!!!!!"

## Lessons learned

It has been difficult to delineate the project largely because of its complexity.

It still feels like a necessary experience and it has given us a good basis for further development of Tjeizonen and our work with young girls.

Looking back, it would have been good to extend the project and schedule the conference separately and work with it separately.

It has been a process-oriented work where time has been an important factor to produce new patterns and structures to be created. It was therefore an asset to the project that we were forced to have a break of about 9 months due to the project manager being on indefinite sick leave. It is probably also why the project has been so productive beyond our expectations. Another reason is that nearly all employees in Tjeizonen have been involved in the project. Without their help it would have been difficult to achieve the result we did.

The project has had a lot of material to analyze because Tjeizonen has a great chat activity. It also gives the results credibility and empirical focus, which had been difficult with smaller and younger activities.

World Childhood Foundations trust, faith and dialogue with Tjeizonen has been crucial to the success of the project. The objective has been shaped during the process and was declared in Tjeizonen's report about chatsupport; *as writing in a diary that responds:*

***To , as far as possible, articulate and develop a sustainable, quality assured and affordable chat activity to benefit the target group and meets the needs of the volunteers and the outside world. The aim has been to disseminate the results of the development to other organizations and activities to contribute to the development of support for young people online.***

As a nonprofit organization, to offer counseling via chat to girls between 12-25 years that often are about very difficult and serious problems demands a distinct and a professional approach.

This gives sustainability and effectiveness for both target group and volunteers in the long run.

Therefore, it was important for Tjeizonen to draw clear guidelines also for what we don't do:

- We do not replace health care, student health, welfare or other experts and clinicians
- We do not provide diagnosis
- We do not replace friends, family and other related
- We do not mention, refer or tell the girls what they should do if they do not ask for it specifically



## Sustainability

The long term effects of the project for the target group is an overall better chat activity and increased opportunities for support online for the target group. The chat is now:

- effective to alleviate and prevent mental illness as the girls and the girls network express it
- available as a free zone for the target group
- effective economically for Tjeizonen and its contributors
- a good and satisfying activity for volunteer work
- a model for other organizations to be inspired by and thus increase opportunities for support online for children and young people.

As Tjeizonen target group increases and the more available we are online, the better treatment they receive from Tjeizonen volunteers. Right now, we see an increase in girls with self injury (as cut, burn, prostitution, eating disorders, suicide attempts) often caused by past abuse: - *“If somebody else hurts me I don't have to hurt myself”* (translated quotes from the chat). These issues are often surrounded by guilt and shame, which makes it very difficult to talk about off-line. Girls often express a deep gratitude for the support they receive in Tjeizonen chat: -*“ Thanks' for letting me speak out!”* (translated quotes from the chat). After taking account of recent research on online support and the target group's words, together with Tjeizonen own experience of support work, we believe that we prevent and alleviate mental health problems among the target group. Therefore we also believe that we are an important complement to pupils' health and health care and other experts.

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