GM Instructions

Explore the unexpected human connections that form between dial-a-psychic gig workers and the people who call for help. No prior LARP experience necessary. Players need no preparation for playing the game (and don't need to be psychic).

Players: 6-12 people. See Game Set up for chart of how many players of each type.
Time: 4 hours
Play location: For in person play, ideally 3-5 areas/rooms with reasonable sound separation. One area is the psychic's work break room, where coworkers talk to each other when they're not answering the phone. Other areas are phone answering stations.
Game setting: Approximately the US in the 1990's. A time when people made phone calls from landlines and many people never used the Internet.
Player characters: There are two types of players, psychics and callers. *Psychics* portray someone who has just started a new job working at a psychic hotline. *Callers* portray multiple different callers who phone into the psychic hotline, as well as hotline supervisors. Callers should have access to a timer (such as their phone).
GM: Facilitates set-up and transitions between play stages. Also plays a caller when needed.

Game play stages:

1. Psychics & callers character workshop: Psychics develop their characters. Callers select their caller prompts.
2. Psychic new staff onboarding.
3. Qualifying call. Each psychic takes their first call. Psychics then get tips and feedback at a supervisory meeting.
4. Week 1 on the hotline. Psychics meet different callers. This ends with a supervisory meeting.
5. Week 6 on the hotline. Psychics have become part of callers' lives.
6. Corporation party and optional debrief/epilogue.

Stage 0: Game Set Up Logistics

Print out a copy of the GM Instructions for your reference. Print the appropriate number of copies of the Psychic & Caller player handouts for your number of players. Print out & cut up the caller prompt cards. Bring pencils/pens for all players.

The number of psychic players and caller players is shown in the chart below, along with the number of calls the GM will play in Stage 4 and Stage 5:

Total Players	Number of psychics & callers	Calls the GM will take in Stage 4 and Stage 5	Number of call stations to set up
6	4 psychics, 2 callers	0	2
7	5 psychics, 2 callers	2	3
8	5 psychics, 3 callers	0	3
9	6 psychics, 3 callers	0	3
10	7 psychics, 3 callers	2	4
11	7 psychics, 4 callers	0	4
12	8 psychics, 4 callers	0	4

Notes

Stage 1: Character Workshop – 15 minutes

Explain that this game will have several jumps in time. The first scene is when the psychics come to work for orientation. Then, time jumps to a shift during their first week on the hotline. Then, time jumps to a shift during their sixth week on the hotline. Finally, time jumps to the end of quarter party.

Separate the caller players and psychic players. Give everyone a pencil/pen and their handouts.

Get the psychic players started with creating their characters by explaining the first page of their handout. While they fill out this page, get the caller players to select their caller prompt cards.

Ask the Psychic players to answer 5 questions to develop their character. (Page 1 of the Psychic handout.)

1. Character name & the reason that their character is taking this job.
2. A personal difficulty that may (or may not) connect to the reason they are taking this job. Example: After a contentious divorce, Lou needs money for child support payments and struggles to maintain a relationship with their daughter.
3. What kind of hotline has their character ever called? Why did they call? (This could be anything from the Butterball Turkey Hotline to a suicide hotline.)
4. What does their character thinks of people who call psychic hotlines?
5. Does the character believe they are psychic?

Psychic players should also write down their lines and veils on Page 2 of the Psychic handout, so they can show this to caller players before calls. Lines are things they do not want the caller to do during a call (such as raise their voice or cry). Veils are topics they do not want the caller to discuss during a call (such as suicide, child abuse, sexual assault).

Caller players select an appropriate number of caller cards and leave an unused pile. One quick way to do this is to deal out 8 cards to each caller player, have each player select the cards in their hand they want to keep, and then swap their unselected cards with other players or the unused pile. Each caller prompt card has two phrases. The top/first phrase is a prompt for the superficial reason this caller phoned the hotline. The bottom/second phrase is a prompt for a deeper reason this caller phoned the hotline. Caller players can use these prompts to help create a set of callers they will play.

Stage 2: New staff onboarding – 10 minutes

Explain that this is the first time they report to work for training. Psychic players participate as their characters. Caller players participate as supervisors/trainers, taking turns reading the orientation materials and answering any questions. Supervisors at this hotline are not much more experienced than trainees. If they don't know how to answer a trainee's question, they can role play a clueless supervisor.

After the end of the training, the GM should give the psychic players 5 minutes to talk among themselves (and come up with their phone names) before the next stage, which is the qualifying call that takes place right after training.

Stage 3: Qualifying call – 50 Minutes total

3A: The calls – 40 minutes

For the first call, set up only 1 call station, and have everyone listen in (psychics who are not on call should NOT go to the break room during this initial calls), so that everyone understands the call mechanics. Psychic characters are listening as observing colleagues in character, while caller characters are listening as supervisors (who are never introduced to the psychic workers by name). For the rest of the qualifying calls, psychics who are not on call should go to the break room. Ask for 1 volunteer psychic and 1 volunteer caller to do the first call. Walk everyone through the call role play instructions during this first call. After the first call, set up the other call stations. Psychics not taking a call should go to the break room.

Call Role Play Instructions (GM should instruct players)

- Set up 2 chairs back-to-back for a call station. One is the caller chair and one is the psychic chair. Players should volunteer to be the next psychic to answer a call by sitting in the psychic chair, and volunteer to be the next caller by sitting in the other chair. Generally, caller players will stay in the same call station, while psychic characters will switch around.
- The caller player should take a moment to pick out (and circle the name of) the caller character they will be for this call and review the caller prompt card.
- The psychic player should review the “Answering the phone” part of their training manual, share their phone name with the caller player and show them their list of lines and veils. The psychic player can then turn to the caller log portion at the end of their training manual.
- When both players are ready, the caller player should announce the caller character’s name as if they are an operator routing a call to the psychic. They should say: “Incoming call from Tina for Madam Esmerelda. Ring ring ring.”
- The psychic player should quickly check if they’ve spoken to this caller before. If so, they should continue making notes in that caller’s file. If not, they should start a new caller file. They should answer the call and then role play the call until it ends.
- The caller player should write down on their caller card which psychic they spoke to.
- Call role-play will last for about 8 minutes.
    - The caller player should set a visible but not audible timer for 8 minutes. When it goes off, they have the option of wrapping up the conversation naturally (which could include the caller having some reason they need to go).
    - Their other option is to steer the conversation so that it would go on quite a long time, but to call “cut” after about 8 minutes. The rest of the call is imagined to then happen off screen.
- At the end of the call, the caller player may jot down any notes on the caller card about anything they want to remember in case they play this caller again, or if they want to share feedback inspired by this call in the supervisory meeting.

3B: Supervisory meeting – 10 minutes

Once every psychic player has taken 1 call, the GM should direct all players to the break room for a supervisory meeting. At this meeting, the caller players will play hotline supervisors. The supervisor should take turns sharing advice for the new psychics. The trainers/supervisors want and need to recruit as many psychic hotline workers as possible. They should be encouraging rather than critical. The purpose of this meeting is to share some tips for success.

The GM or one of the supervisors should wrap up this stage by saying “Congratulations, you are all now qualified to work as psychics!”

Stage 4: Week 1 on the hotline – 60 minutes total

Explain that time has jumped to a shift during their first week of work.

4A: Character evolution – 5 minutes At the start of this stage, the GM should tell the psychic players to consider their characters. Each psychic player should decide on something that is happening in their character’s life outside of the hotline, which can be their original issue getting worse or changing such that they want/need this job even more.

4B: The calls – 45 minutes

Use 2 or 3 call stations depending on how many caller players there are in game. The caller player at a call station will be almost continuously role playing different caller characters, with different psychic players rotating into being on call. The caller players should make each call be from a new caller, so by the end of this stage, they will have role played all (or all except one) of their character cards.

During this stage, each psychic should take 2 calls. These will be from callers they haven’t spoken to before. Psychics who are in the break room should be ready to rotate into being on call so there isn’t a lot of downtime at a call station. If the number of players is such that the GM needs to take calls, they should staff the empty call station the target number of times.

In the break room, psychics can talk to each other about calls, but also about the other things going on in their life.

4C: Supervisory meeting – 10 minutes. Once every psychic player has taken 2 calls, the GM should direct all players to the break room for a supervisory meeting. At this meeting, the caller players will play hotline supervisors. The supervisor should take turns sharing some caller feedback. Although in-game each caller left feedback for a specific psychic, during the supervisory meeting all feedback is not tied to a caller name or a psychic name. All the psychics are welcome to believe that some or none of the feedback was left by their callers.

The purpose of this meeting is to share some caller feedback that the psychic workers can react to going forward.

The GM or one of the supervisors should wrap up this stage by saying something like “Hotline revenue was up 10% last week. As recognition of all of your hard work, here is a Dunkin coupon for a free donut with the purchase of a hot beverage.”

Stage 5: Week 6 on the hotline – 60 minutes total

Explain that time has jumped to a shift during their sixth week of work.

5A: Character evolution – 5 minutes. At the start of this stage, the GM should tell the psychic players to consider their characters. They should decide on how things have changed for their character after working on the hotline for over a month. What does their character now think about people who call psychic hotlines? What does their character think about people who work for psychic hotlines?

5B: The calls – 55 minutes. For this stage, the caller players should make each call come from a returning caller. The returning caller can speak with the same psychic or a new psychic. A returning caller could be disappointed that their original psychic is unavailable, or could be dissatisfied with their original psychic. (If a caller player doesn't want to replay some previous caller characters, they could also pick a new character and imagine they called before and spoke to a psychic who is not in the game.)

During this stage, each psychic should take 2 calls. These will be from returning callers. Again, psychics who are in the break room should be ready to rotate into being on call so there isn't a lot of downtime at a call station. If the number of players is such that the GM needs to take calls, they should staff the empty call station the target number of times.

Stage 6: Corporation party and optional debrief – **25 minutes total**

Explain that time has jumped to the end of quarter party.

6A: Character evolution – 5 minutes. At the start of this stage, the GM should tell the psychic players to consider their characters. Do they believe they are helping or hurting callers? Do they believe doing this job is helping or hurting themselves? They should consider if their character would want to keep working on the hotline, are thinking of quitting, or want to get fired.

6B: Party – 10 minutes: The in-character part of this stage is the psychic hotline's low budget quarterly party. The caller players will role play as hotline supervisors. After giving the psychics a few minutes for socialization, the supervisors should make an announcement: "Great news, everyone. Hotline revenue was strong this quarter, and we had almost 80% staff retention over three months!" and "Congratulations to the cohort who is just celebrating their second month here with us. Each of you is now eligible for promotion to supervisor." and "As supervisors, you'd still answer calls, but you'd also listen in on the calls for newer psychics and run supervisory meetings. Plus, you'd get a $1/hr raise. Give yourself a big round of applause!" The supervisors can then ask every psychic if they are taking the promotion or not.

The GM should then thank everyone for playing and invite them to the optional debrief.

6C: Debrief – 10 minutes:

At the debrief, players can take turns answering questions like:

- (All) Was there a moment from the game that was particularly memorable or impactful for you?
- (Psychics) Did your character change or learn something from working at the hotline?
- (Callers) Which of your characters was impacted the most by calling the hotline, and how were they impacted?

Appendix

Game background notes: I volunteered at a peer phone hotline for 8 years. Later, I started offering free oracle card readings at musical festivals/events. (FYI, I am not and do not claim to be a psychic.) I found that talking to hotline callers and performing card readings are very similar experiences, and some people are more comfortable asking for support when there is a magical factor. Anthropologist Manvir Singh makes the point in his book “Shamanism” that neither the shaman nor the help seeker need to entirely believe in magical powers for genuine help and healing to happen. I hope this game will give players a chance to experience the human connection of stepping briefly into a stranger’s world and providing some help, even as they are acting within a capitalist transactional framework under fraudulently claimed qualifications.

A juggernaut in the dial-a-psychic business is: https://www.californiapsychics.com/ Take a look if you’re curious!

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