

Giving them a new lease of life

By C. Maya

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THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, APRIL 1. At 11-30 p.m., as lights were being turned off one by one in the street, in one of the houses, a 25-year-old was contemplating suicide.

He knew what he had to do. And was determined not to make mistakes like he did twice before. But on an impulse, he picked up the phone and dialled a number that he had seen in the newspaper that morning - 554295.

As he talked, tears started to flow. He spoke and spoke - all about himself, home, parents, friends, his fears, his loneliness... all that he had kept bottled inside him for a long time.

At 4-30 in the morning, when he put down the phone, he had changed his mind - at least for the moment. He still needed help but he knew where to reach out to.

It has been two weeks, and the youngster has learnt to keep a hold on himself. He will need direct counselling for some time, but help at a critical moment had helped the young man deviate his mind from the path of self destruction.

In times of trouble, dial 554295 and help will be right at hand. 'Thrani', a project of the State AIDS Cell and the city's first ever telephonic 24-hour crisis control unit, started functioning two weeks ago. In the last two weeks, the centre received about 60 distress calls -



The office of the crisis control unit, 'Thrani', in the city.

marital discords, sexuality issues and crises within families were some of the problems that were brought up.

"There is no support system in the community to deal with such crises. Most people, even when they decide to end everything, desperately seek something to cling on to. Prompt response to their cry for help can save many lives," says Dr. Elizabeth Vadakkekara, psychiatrist, at Thrani.

"People who have not opened up to anyone, who have never been able to share their innermost feelings with anyone for fear of being rejected, find it easier to talk to an anonymous voice over telephone because of the confidentiality involved," she says.

The Centre has 20 volunteers with expert training who work

in shifts to provide round-the-clock counselling service. Apart from helping people handle crises in their lives, 'Thrani' gives direct counselling and therapeutic treatments for those who require it. It also has counsellors in its panel, with legal or financial expertise, to help those in financial crises.

Good mental disposition of parents, good marital relations and strong family bonds could go a long way in allaying suicidal tendencies, Dr. Elizabeth said. Most of the cases relating to issues of sexuality could be traced to some childhood experiences of abuse or incest, which leave permanent scars on a person's mind.

Instances of sexual abuse are on the increase also because of

the fact that most often working parents are not able to keep a close eye on children, who are often left home under the care of others, it is pointed out.

Dr. Elizabeth, who has had extensive experience in suicide prevention through community intervention, says that retrospective studies on suicide attempters have led doctors to believe that their destructive tendencies were a consequence of the conflict undergone by their parents in the gestation period.

"Children born of unwanted pregnancies are prone to be stubborn, with behavioural problems. They grow up moody, are highly impulsive, with low levels of stress-tolerance. The conflict and negative feelings of parents get encoded in the brain cells and its cumulative effects manifests in the form of depression," Dr. Elizabeth says.

These children should be given a renewed sense of security and a good family atmosphere for them to cope. It is important for couples to be well-disposed and mentally prepared for parenthood and pre-marital counselling thus indirectly becomes important for suicide prevention.

Media should desist from highlighting suicide attempts, she says. For someone with self-destructive tendencies, flashy newspaper reports on suicides could act as a catalyst, counsellors point out.