

# Controlling crisis, round-the-clock

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MEET

## Dr. Elizabeth Vadakkekara

**D**r. Elizabeth has been accompanying people through their pain, letting them unfold their worries and voice their anxieties, lending them a patient ear, empathising with them.

"We have no support system in our community to help people who are mentally distressed and are desperately seeking a helping hand. If we can respond to their call for help promptly, we could save many from the path of self-destruction," she says

"Thrani", which started functioning here last year, has been helping many deal with crises in their lives through telephonic counselling. Direct counselling and therapeutic treatment are also given to those who require it. The response has been phenomenal, with the centre having handled nearly 1,000 phone calls and 3,000-odd cases of direct counselling till now.

"Mental health is a neglected area in our health management system. Mental illnesses are like any other disease and we should be able to approach a doctor for check-ups just as you would in the case of other diseases. We need a community-based mental health improvement programme, wherein mental health care can be incorporated with the general health care," she says.

In the present scenario, the social stigma attached to

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**"Training in life-skills—resilience power, self-confidence, positive approach, optimism, etc.— should be given importance in the upbringing of children."**

mental illnesses and even psychiatric counselling is so much that one seeks the help of a doctor only when early symptoms become full-blown, she points out.

Psychiatric disorders or genetic pre-disposition to mental illnesses, traumatic events in childhood, such as sexual abuse or poor life-skills such as stress tolerance were generally found to be the factors that led people to commit suicide. Suicide prevention was possible if one

could recognise the early warning signals such as depression.

Suicide prevention programmes are being launched at the panchayat-level by training counsellors in detecting those prone to suicide, as part of the community health-care programme, Dr. Elizabeth says.

"Training in life-skills—resilience power, self-confidence, positive approach, optimism etc.— should be given utmost

importance in the upbringing of children. Since our children today spend most of their time at school or tuition centres, such training programmes should be made school-based. We have been trying to give this message to schools and some have responded positively," she says.

Good mental disposition of parents, good marital relations and strong family bonds can go a long way in checking suicidal tendencies. "Thrani" had been receiving more distress calls from teenagers and children complaining of parental 'neglect' while parents were tearful about the behavioural problems in their children.

"Today's children have low stress tolerance levels, they are temperamental and high-strung. At the slightest provocation, they might attempt a suicide just to teach their parents a lesson," she points out.

She feels that if parenting has become more of a challenge in recent times, it was because parents were unable to spend quality time with their children. The emotional needs of children are not met when parents try to be too strict.

"Most parents do not know where to draw a line. You should be assertive with your children, but not over-bearing. Do not ignore or treat your child with contempt just because he is academically not up to your expectations," she says. "Children born of unwanted pregnancies are prone to be stubborn, with behavioural problems. The conflict and negative feelings of parents get encoded in the brain cells and its cumulative effects manifests in the form of depression," she says.

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