

Helping them tide over mental agony

THE HINDU
May 20, 2001

By S. Anil Radhakrishnan

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MAY 20. "My friend asks why should he continue to live. He wants to leave his home and is restless and totally confused. Please help him overcome the anxiety over his bad performance in the exam."

This was one of the telephone messages received by a counsellor manning the service centre of State AIDS Control Society in the city. The centre was set up on May 16, two days before the SSLC results were announced, to help the students overcome anxiety and depression that may result in suicide attempts.

Another caller, a close relative of a student, phoned in to say, "She has not been taking food for the last one week and is lying in bed. She is disturbed. Please advise her."

The round-the-clock service, available till May 25, is being provided at the premises of the NGOs running health projects of the Society in all the districts in the State.

In the State capital, the tele-counselling service offered by the Thrani Centre for Crisis Control commenced at 7.30 p.m. on May 16 and the first call was received within minutes.

Initially, the centre received calls from outside the city. For the next two days, the counsellors were flooded with calls from students who had appeared for the examination, their parents, friends and relatives.

Compared to the previous year, the authorities say there

are more enquiries and calls this year. It was mostly parents, friends, brothers and sisters of the students who rang up seeking counselling. Till today, over 3,000 calls have been received at the centre, which functions from near the Government Ophthalmic Hospital.

According to the counsellors, the telephone calls were mainly from far-flung areas such as Malappuram, Nilambur, Manjeri, Kozhikode, Kottayam, Chengannur, Thrissur, Ambalapuzha and Kottarakara. Two calls were from as far as New Delhi.

There were parents who called the helpline and said their son or daughter was lying in the bed and not taking food for the last couple of days due to anxiety over the results. After the counsellors talked to the parents, the students were counselled over the telephone. The parents are asked by counsellors to support their children.

It was not only those who expected low marks in the SSLC examination who rang up the centre seeking advice. The callers included those who expected first class and distinction. This year, there were calls from parents and students who expected 550 marks and above, but had not been able to make the grade.

Students, especially boys, called up the helpline from telephone booths to keep their parents in the dark about their anguish over the examination results and the mental agony they were undergoing.

In some cases, the centre authorities asked the parents of the students to call back the counsellors as a follow-up. This year, the counsellors advised at least 10 parents to shift their children to hospital immediately as they needed medical attention.

The counsellors say the students were also anxious about their failure to rise to the expectations of the parents and teachers. The fear of facing society and worries over securing an admission to the Plus Two courses are also there. The parents' anxiety is over how their children fare in comparison with others and about the problems in securing an admission to Plus Two courses.

It is for the third year that Thrani, a project of the Foundation for Integrated Research in Mental Health (FIRM), is offering telephone counselling for SSLC students.

The centre is headed by Dr. Elizabeth Vadakkakara, a psychologist, and has three counsellors — Mr. T.S. Arun Kumar, Mr. Shoban Kodul and Sister Mary Sebastian. As many as 20 other voluntary counsellors in the city had been trained by the centre to provide telephone counselling to students.

The Institute of Mental Health had also organised tele-counselling service in the city for students and parents. Meanwhile, Thrani has started receiving calls from students who appeared for the Vocational Higher Secondary Examination in March.