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De-stress call

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Written by **Srinath Rao** | Posted: March 3, 2013 1:43 am

The landline rings in a tiny, sunlit room in a Powai high-rise overlooking the go-karting track. Arpita, one of the three counsellors who had just begun the shift, glances at the caller ID before taking the call. As she answers, the other two drop whatever they are doing, cutting themselves off mid-sentence. For, the next few minutes could be crucial to saving a life at the other end.

These phones in the office of the Vandrevalla Foundation, have callers from all over the country and even beyond, seeking help from what is termed India's first professionally run 24x7 mental health helpline.

Most helplines are staffed by volunteers. We employ professional counsellors, who are given rigorous training as well as refresher courses, said Dr Arun John, the Foundation's Executive Vice-President and head of its India operations.

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The helpline was established in 2009 after a pressing need was felt

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for counselling when it was needed the most. John said, If I am in a crisis at 1am, I will not see a counsellor until the next morning. Until then, who knows how much stress I will go through?

The helpline became operational in August 2009, and has received more than 42,000 calls seeking help on issues ranging from exam-stress to

suicidal tendencies.

The fact that they call us means they are willing to help themselves, says Alia, who, along with Arpita and Vidya all pseudonyms works during one of three daily shifts.

A man contemplating suicide had called us a month ago. He said he wanted to end his life but every time he thought of it, the face of his four-year-old daughter would pop up. So we counselled him along those lines, said Vidya.

As much as the helpline is looked at as a quickfix solution, these women are firm that solving problems is not their job. We only point out the options they have. If a problem is too serious, we patch the call through to a psychologist or psychiatrist working on each shift. Some cases require face-to-face counselling, which we conduct at Hiranandani Hospital. But most times, the callers just need someone to hear them out, said Arpita.

With the HSC exams under way, they say they have been receiving calls from stressed students and their parents. A boy called a few days ago saying he was prepared with all