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In Mumbai, calls to mental health helplines soar

TNN | Oct 8, 2014, 11:31PM IST

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MUMBAI: In an indicator of the city's poor mental health, a helpline that operates out of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) has registered a three-fold rise in calls since last year. "We were set up in September 2012 and got 4,100 calls in the first year. The numbers rose to 13,800 in the year ending September 2014," said Paras Sharma, coordinator of iCall, the helpline operating out of the Deonar-based TISS.

Worse, every second caller to the helpline was a youngster: Around 47% callers were aged below 30. "Young professionals in the 21-30 age group form the largest group of callers, mainly with issues about work-life balance," said Sharma. Students in the 11-20 age group are a close second, with exam-related stress prompting them to dial the helpline.

The experience at the Vandrevala Foundation's helpline is similar. "Most callers are below 25. They call due to relationship-related problems," said Dr Arun John of the foundation, which has clocked over 66,000 calls since 2009.

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In a city in which suicides claim double the number of lives lost in road accidents, doctors say the response to helplines is not surprising. National Crime Records Bureau statistics for 2013 showed that while 1,322 Mumbaikars committed suicide, 668 lost their lives in road accidents.

The municipal corporation's mental health helpline running at KEM Hospital in Parel got 3,500 calls within six months from May 2013.

It is now an accepted medical fact that helplines are effective in reducing suicides. A study by the Government Medical College in Chandigarh, and published in the Indian Journal of Medical Sciences in 2013, established that suicides in the city declined since the helpline was set up.

Psychiatrist Dr Harish Shetty said that fact that youngsters form the bulk of callers to helplines shows their ease with the medium. "Youngsters feel comfortable with phones and emails. One cannot expect the older generation to be equally at ease with phones," he said. But he said the response to helplines shows the helplessness in society.

In keeping with the theme of digitization, iCall got emails from 1,000 people in 2013-14. "Almost 90% of those who emailed got back to us. While only 30% call back, email has a higher response rate," said Sharma from TISS.

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