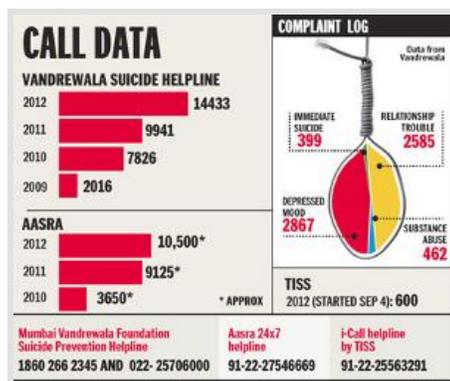


Saved by the bell

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The well-appointed room on the 11th floor of Hiranandani Gardens could easily be mistaken for a tiny call centre. Four people in their twenties are sitting at four work stations set up in a 10-foot-by-10-foot space. There is one telephone at each table, and a few pairs of headphones are strewn around.

The conversation in the room is your normal workplace banter, until 10:05 am, when one of the phones begins to ring. Twenty-eight-year-old Sharvari Prabhu quietly gestures to her colleagues to get ready and presses the button on her headset. "I am going to kill myself. It is my final decision," says a woman's voice at the other end. "I have hung

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the noose. I'm just waiting for my husband to leave for work." She clicks off.

All of a sudden, this tiny suicide helpline run by the Vandrewala foundation becomes the hub of frenetic activity. For the next few minutes, the four 20-somethings, all clinical psychologists working as counselors - often the final port of call for the person who has decided to end his or her life - try calling the woman back. The recorded message says her phone is switched off but they know they must keep trying. Engaging with her may be the only way to save her life.

At 10:26 pm, 21 minutes after her call, the woman answers. What follows is a lesson in crisis management like few others. Over the next half hour, the woman, failing to hold back her tears, tells the counselor that she is a 35-year-old mother of three from a Mumbai suburb. She says that she's well-educated but, even after 10 years of marriage, has not been able to convince her orthodox in-laws and husband that she be allowed to work. She says her freedom is curbed to an extent that she isn't allowed to step out of the house without permission. She said she's frustrated, and wants to end her life because that's the only way she'll be free.

The counselor, who has dealt with such cases in the past, starts talking to the woman about the simple pleasures of life, beginning with the joy of watching her children grow up. "I asked her how she deals with the twins. I told her to tell me about their likes and dislikes, and the kind of pranks they pulled," Prabhu tells Mumbai Mirror. "I tried to create the image of her kids in front of her eyes, and made her to think about their well-being. I asked her who they were most attached to in the house. When she replied it was her, half my work was done."

Dealing with a call is a collaborative effort. While the other three counselors are frantically digging out conversation patterns and the location of the nearest medical professional, Prabhu tries to convince the woman that she needs to live, if nothing else, for what she means to her kids. "I understood that she wanted to earn money of her own, and to feel more independent. I suggested that she should start stepping out of the house gradually, first by taking her children out to play. I recommended that she talk to her husband, and simultaneously take up some hobbies that may keep her busy at home doing more than just household chores."

By the time the call ends, the woman has confessed that she didn't really want to die, and that the

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decision to commit suicide was an extreme spur-of-the-moment reaction. She had felt in her frustration that she'd hit a dead end.

The helpline will continue to monitor the woman's progress for the next two days, calling her at regular intervals, and will finally encourage her to meet with a therapist, and perhaps a psychiatrist who can prescribe medication for her depression.

This call was just one of the 14,400 cries for help that the Vandrevala foundation's helpline has received this year. In a city getting more prone to depression, the numbers have been soaring over the last three years. The helpline had received 9,941 calls in 2011 and 7,826 calls in 2010. The average call rate now is approximately 60-80 per day. The number includes people who are feeling depressed and fear that they may be suicidal in the near future. Three hundred and ninety-nine calls have been from those who wanted to kill themselves right then.

The counselors at the helpline say they've been able to save all those who have called them - except for a 39-year-old man suffering from depression due to a sudden financial loss. The man had spoken to the counselors for an hour, and had seemingly decided against killing himself. But a follow-up call two days later was answered by a family member, who said that he had committed suicide the day before. "It was a blow to us," says the foundation's executive vice-president Arun John.

The Vandrevala foundation runs one of three major suicide help lines in the city. The other two are I-Call, run by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and Aasra, which started as a daily six-hour service that now runs 24x7.

The numbers at each of them are similar: all suggesting a rising trend. The statistics show the problem goes across age-groups, starting from an 8-year-old boy who was upset he had scored poorly in an exam to an 85-year-old woman who felt lonely because her children had moved to the United States. The reasons are varied: unrequited love, abusive husbands, suspicion that their spouse is having an affair, solitude, adolescent embarrassment, financial loss, and clinical obsession.

"The golden rule is that people who get in touch with us want to live - even those who say they have a bottle of poison in front of them, or are holding a blade to slit their wrists. They call because they want to feel accepted and find a reason to stay alive," said counselor Rinku Das. "They're looking for someone who can talk to them, and who can tell them about what they will be missing once they're gone. They need to not be judged, to hear why they are important, and how their absence will affect those around them. Suicide happens in an impulsive moment. If we can manage those crucial 4-5 minutes well, we know we can help them."

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, there were 1,162 suicides in Mumbai in 2011, as opposed to 1,385 in Delhi and 1,717 in Bangalore. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates over 1.7 lakh people commit suicide in India every year. A research paper in The Lancet in June said that suicide was the single-largest cause of death in the 15-29 age bracket in the country.

Psychiatrist Dr Harish Shetty says the trend is worrying but not entirely unexpected. "It shows the helplessness and hopelessness of city life these days. There is an increased unpredictability of life in terms of price hikes, jobs, businesses, which people are finding tough to deal with. There is very little emotional contact time as the person runs around fulfilling other needs," he said. "Almost every consultation culminates into the person confessing that he or she has contemplated suicide."

But the encouraging sign is that help is more easily available, and that more people are reaching out for it. Take the case of a 35-year-old man who had called the Vandrevala help line last month from Powai Lake, threatening to jump in because he was being unable to pay Rs 25,000 he had borrowed from a money lender. The man, who said he needed more time to return the money, was being unable to muster up the courage to ask for a month's respite. The counselors not only dissuaded the man from killing himself, they also convinced the lender that a life was at stake, and that she should be lenient.

The caller made good on his promise a few days ago, and follow-up calls have indicated that forget suicidal, he isn't even depressed any more. "While it may be a commentary on increasing depression in the city, it is a hugely positive sign that the number of calls are going up," said Hyacinth Pereira, a senior vice-president at Vandrevala foundation. "It shows that there is less hesitation in seeking help, and that people want to be pulled out of a depressed state of mind. The first part of the battle is being won.

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