

Reading the signs right

With a hybrid learning environment in place, college teachers across Chennai pick up special skills to identify mental health issues among students

LIFY THOMAS

It was an event where faculty members of KCG College of Technology were presented with hypothetical conversations between students. Coming from millennials, these conversations had the distinct flavour of texting.

The teachers' task was to sift through these messages for direct and indirect signs of suicidal intentions.

Dr Yamini Kannappan, consultant psychiatrist, Department of Psychiatry, Kauvery Hospital, pointed out that while the participants identified most of the warning signs, they admitted to an inability to start a conversation around suicide. The doctor had been invited by the college management for a session on suicide ahead of World Suicide Prevention Day (September 10).

A 'Suicide Gatekeeper Training Programme' was the highlight of this workshop where the larger goal was to empower faculty members through QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer).

"We handpicked 45 faculty members from across departments for this workshop and they would in turn talk to their colleagues about looking out for signs of distress among students and refer anyone to the student counsellor if needed," says Revathy Dhushyanthan, a full-time student counsellor with KCG College of Technology.

"Previously, faculty members would pick up cues from the students' behaviour and refer them to the Student Counsellor. That has reduced with online classes. Hence this



programme."

Experts say teachers must be in constant touch with their students and create awareness about various resources.

Divya Dovina, head of department, Psychology, Stella Maris College, points out that last year, at the start of the pandemic, for the first time, the contact numbers of the faculty members of the Psychology Department were put up on the website to enable students to contact them.

"This did help as most of us got calls from students going through pandemic-induced stress," says Divya, adding that it was later extended to the general public.

Social media help

To understand what's going through the mind of students, the Department reached out to them through the college's Instagram handle. "We did a 'need analysis' to understand what students were going through and we were happy that many opened up more than we would have expected them to, in a physical environment. Not only because we connected through a medium where they were in regular touch but also because they could

remain anonymous," says Divya.

Madras Christian College's Student Counselling Services brought out a poster – shared on the college website – on dealing with grief during the pandemic, which also lists ways one can offer help to a person who is grieving.

Christina D, student counsellor, Loyola College, says students, especially the class representatives and club coordinators, can inform the faculty or counsellor about students showing abnormal behaviour. "Many a time, where a teacher has not been able to spot it, a student has alerted us to such behaviour," she says, adding even parents must watch out for signs.

Teachers as gatekeepers
Dr. Yamini says teachers can be gatekeepers in this matter and institutions must invest in training them in this role on a regular basis. "For teachers who

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already know the students, it should be easy to identify changes in behaviour like frequent absenteeism and any signs of constant inattention. And like any teacher does, it's important to find out what's happening to the student," says the doctor.

Spot behavioural and virtual cues among students. Status message of students on WhatsApp, posts on social media are cues that teachers can keep a tab on, and sad emoji and photos as status message may be virtual suicide notes, she adds.

People need to be trained in identifying and dealing with depression and other factors that can lead to suicide. Towards this need, the stigma associated with depression should be tackled. "Many a time a teacher is in a position to avert a tragedy, provided he/she can identify the warning signs quickly," says Dr. Yamini, adding "Teachers are not expected to be counsellors but only refer the student to an expert who can offer support. Until then they can just offer hope."

For assistance to overcome suicidal thoughts call, SNEHA at 44-24640050 or the state helpline number 104

At an awareness rally conducted at the Institute of Mental Health on World Suicide Prevention Day. FILE PHOTO

SEEKING HELP

Art therapy for patients

Angelin Prince, who runs The Candles, has been using art to help people deal with mental illness.

For a few years, she has been engaging with residents of the Institute of Mental Health in Kilpauk since 2019, when the non-profit, which works in the field of health and mental health, organised a wall-painting event to mark World Suicide Prevention Day.

"We have noticed art bringing positivity to the residents at the Institute, with some of them starting to express themselves better through art," says Angelin.

One popular activity conducted for the residents include collecting fallen twigs, seeds, flowers and stones from the campus and getting the participants to design shapes with them.

"We were engaging with the residents as volunteers three times a month till COVID put an end to our visits to the Institute," she says.

In October 2020, for World Mental Health Awareness Day, The Candles again got permission to take up

art therapy with the residents.

The group is also working with a community at Mevaloorupam, a village near Sriperumbudur, to address mental health issues. "We have established a community centre so that we can continually engage with the community," says Angelin.

Living notes

Suicide Prevention India Foundation, a non governmental organisation that helps prevent suicides through awareness creation and Gatekeeper training, is marking Suicide Prevention Month inviting people to share their living notes.

This year, the theme is "Creating Hope through Action" and it is inviting people to write a personal note, if they wish to stay anonymous, and share on <https://www.mylivingnote.com/>

For those keen on understanding more about the Gatekeeper training so as to spot signs that put one at risk and offer support, log on to the Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/SuicidePreventionIndiaFoundation>

Tips for intervention

- If in doubt, don't wait, ask the question
- If the person is reluctant, be persistent
- Talk to the person alone in a private setting
- Allow the person to talk freely
- Give yourself plenty of time
- Have your sources handy: phone numbers and any other information you might need

Dr Yamini Kannappan, consultant psychiatrist, Department of Psychiatry, Kauvery Hospital