

A black and white close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing glasses and a bindi. She is smiling warmly, showing her teeth. She is seated in a dark, textured leather chair. The background is plain white.

*The Unseen Saviours*

SNEHA



“Survival is the celebration of choosing life over death. Death is inevitable but survival is saying, perhaps not today. In that sense, survivors don’t defeat death. They come to terms with it.”

Sneha is a voluntary organisation run entirely by volunteers, and has suicide prevention as its core objective; linking people with their lives and making them court life keeping in mind the importance of mental health aspect of life. Started in 1986 by Dr. Lakshmi Vijayakumar, a well-known psychiatrist based in Chennai, Sneha has been lending a shoulder to those who are on the verge of suicide and the ones who need an ear every single day for the last 36 years!

Back in 1985, Dr. Lakshmi met Ms. Vanda Scott, President of the Befrienders International, in London, who introduced her to Samaritans, the name given to volunteers of an organization for the prevention of suicide. Inspired by their work, Dr. Lakshmi

came back and started Sneha, a centre for suicide prevention, on the same model as the Samaritans, driven only by trained volunteers who came in 4 hours a week to be there for the suicidal, the depressed, the lonely, the fearful and the hopeless as a friend to listen and decrease the burdens they were carrying, thereby enabling a will to live. The WHO records for suicide in India are at 2,30,000/year, a number that has overtaken the maternal mortality rate. And there are only 6000 - 7000 psychiatrists to address the mental health of the population of 1.3 billion in India. The numbers alarm and it is this that called out to Dr. Lakshmi.

When Dr. Lakshmi started Sneha, there was some amount of criticism. The society was conservative, not yet ready to accept mental health as an entity. An organisation based solely on volunteers would not be viable/sustainable was the next argument. And will the suicidal really pause to talk? Sneha addressed all of these. Dr. Lakshmi feels this was possible because

even the conservatives need someone to talk to and the need overtook beliefs. Slowly the walls of resistance were breached and the awareness started to seep in when someone who sought help wrote about them in a leading magazine. Southern Railways put Sneha’s stickers in their suburban trains and PTC too helped by doing the same in their buses; places where people came to know of the existence of such an organisation.

Sneha receives about 60 - 70 calls a day through a 24 hour helpline or email and that is testimony to the fact that Sneha has managed a shift in thinking. People do reach out for help. Education may give knowledge but doesn’t necessarily impart wisdom, opines Dr. Lakshmi. The present generation is ‘instant-centric’; everything needs to happen in an instant, with quick solutions and quick fixes. They do not have it in them to spend time

working on issues. Coping skills are sorely missing. They have more networks but fewer connections. The economic downfall, the breakdown in family structure and interpersonal relationships, the pressure to live up etc have further led to the inevitable.

Careful consideration of all the factors that can lead to suicide is one of the hallmarks of Sneha. Dr. Lakshmi credits the volunteers’ determination and commitment for its success and she goes on to explain the 4 processes that are vital for volunteers -

1. Unconditional acceptance – each and every person is accepted completely and treated with utmost respect.
2. Availability – there is always someone there at all times for whoever knocks on the doors.
3. Absolute confidentiality – even the phones do not have caller-ids; the callers,



their identities and issues are kept confidential, as this fosters trust and urges them to come forward more.

4. Empathy - a call to Sneha is a cry for help for someone who is in a state of heightened emotions. Dr. Lakshmi compares such a person to a pressure cooker. To relieve the pressure, a volunteer would have to release the steam slowly, the emotions would have to be allowed to come out little by little. Empathy is that ability to understand completely the emotions and feelings of the other to help them find their will to live. Volunteers at Sneha call their work unique and say it is this connect that makes their jobs fulfilling.

Beyond the volunteers and their work, Sneha has undertaken awareness campaigns at schools, colleges, hospitals and workplaces that contact them for sessions.

Self-help groups, nurses, police personnel, defence personnel, fire-fighters, cine technicians associations and working professionals are all people Sneha has reached out to. Policy work is also uppermost on their agenda. Repealing of Sec-309 of the IPC 1860, thereby decriminalisation of the suicide attempt is one of the feathers in their cap. Research to study indigenous patterns of suicides, to work out practical strategies is an ongoing process for Sneha. One of them was the creation of community lockers to store pesticides and fertilisers in villages to prevent the rash consumption of organophosphates as fallout of conflicts and fights. A simple strategy of distancing the means ensured that there were no suicides in the two villages that it was implemented in.

Talking of the act itself, Dr. Lakshmi says suicide is never an impulsive act, but a result of a person reaching a tipping point, the straw that breaks the camel's back. There is never a single reason, but a building up and multiplication of several factors. The ultimate reason may only be the tip of the iceberg she says. The ages between 18 and 30 are the most vulnerable.

Suicides in school children are usually due to academic, family and peer pressure. Cyber-bullying is another major cause. 1/3rd of the children are cyber-bullied and 1/3rd of the children bullied are suicidal. She urges parents to encourage their children to venture out into the real world from the virtual world, have real friends instead of virtual ones and lead by example. The reasons for suicides in colleges are usually interpersonal problems in relationships, inability to cope, adapt to or fit in to expected norms of language, lifestyle or self-esteem and fights with parents over clothing, curfew and what is deemed lack of understanding. The reason for suicides in older people is usually economic ones; like debts, business failures, harassment from loan sharks etc. Between men and women, more men die of suicide and more women attempt suicide. The common ways are poisoning, hanging, self-immolation and jumping from heights or in front of trains.

The mind of a suicidal person, Dr. Lakshmi says, is a triad of loneliness, hopelessness and helplessness. He/she undergoes what is called a 'psyche-ache', the pain of which is much more than the physical pain arising from the method of suicide. Such people are ambivalent, on a see-saw between life and death. If at this point they reach out for help and if the mental see-saw can be swung towards the will to live, then for the moment the danger is averted. This is where the volunteers come in, giving that intangible part of themselves to enable that link with life again. It is for this reason, that it could mean a difference between life and death that the process of selecting and whetting the volunteers is a very rigid one. To be up to the arduous task of convincing people to live, each volunteer is carefully chosen (only those above 20 years, with speaking knowledge of English and Tamil and preferably Hindi too), put through 40 hours of training



and supervised by senior volunteers till they are ready. As far as qualities go, volunteers are expected to be non-judgmental, empathetic and completely accepting. Barring Dr. Lakshmi, none of the volunteers of Sneha are experts in the field of suicidology. They are ordinary people who believe strongly in the cause of suicide prevention and have committed their time to furthering the will to live.

Sneha functions on funds generated by well-wishers and donations made by friends. Their needs are basic and the volunteers work here solely for the meaningfulness of their jobs and are not quantified by monetary compensations. Dr. Lakshmi hopes to double the number of volunteers. She hopes for better acknowledgement of the need for addressing mental health and support from the Government and private sectors to go the distance. Mental health and wellbeing are by far one

of the most neglected areas in our country. According to a recent National Mental Health survey, approximately 150 million people in India need care for their mental health condition. The same survey also discovered that between 70 and 92 percent of these cases failed to receive treatment. The World Health Organisation says India has the highest number of suicide rates globally; something that ought to alarm all the stakeholders. Sneha hopes to bring the numbers down. In a country with a population of 1.3 billion no person should be made to feel alone.

Dr. Lakshmi says suicide prevention is not the prerogative of the health workers alone. Beyond the corridors of Sneha if each person finds the time to take up this onus of talking, listening and communicating, the suicide rates would come down. She adds, with a smile, that the numbers have not dimmed their hope but only strengthened their resolve to care and make a difference.

*Meera Shivashankar*