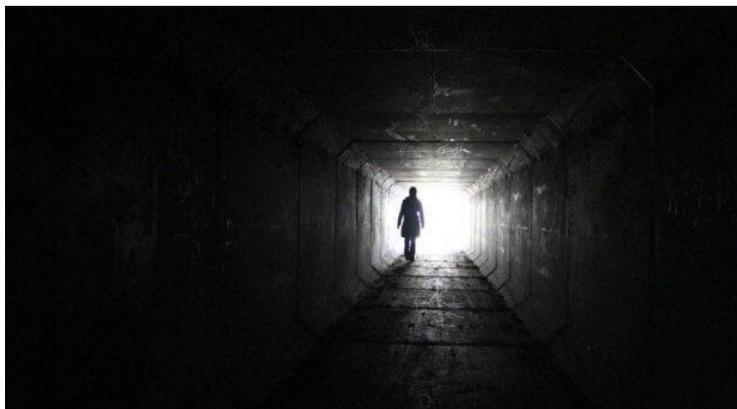


SUMITHRAYO: 48 Years of Befriending and Empowering the Despairing and Suicidal



By Sumithraya

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn life around.”

Sumithrayo was founded on 15th. June 1974, to be the first crisis center in Sri Lanka and has been in the fore front of suicide prevention since then. Befriending and empowering the lonely, depressed, despairing and suicidal with emotional support. It was the vision of the late Joan de Mel to provide these confidential services free and this is available for anyone who seek befriending via face to face, telephone, by letter and email. Sumithrayo is open from 9 am to 8 pm every day of the year.

Sumithrayo seek to alleviate human misery, loneliness, despair and depression by listening to and befriending those who feel that they have no one else to turn to who would understand and accept them. The service is delivered by a group of volunteers. Volunteers are carefully selected and trained to befriend people who are emotionally distressed. Training gives them the skill of befriending. Volunteers are not Counselors but Befrienders. Befriending is the art of actively listening to troubled feelings and helping distressed persons to explore healthy options which can ultimately lead to empowerment and a positive approach to life's issues.

With the passage of time Sumithrayo have expanded their services to meet with emerging needs. Sumithrayo also promote emotional wellness and suicide prevention through community outreach, education and prevention services. Awareness and education programmes are set up to change attitudes and values of the community regarding the practice of suicide and also minimize the risk factors in the community at large. The service is no longer confined to the four walls of a centre, but is community oriented where volunteers are specially trained to work towards changing harmful social practices in the community as a whole.

Suicide prevention has and will always be the primary objective of the organization. Since 1996 when the special Presidential Task Force set up the National Policy on suicide prevention, it is recognized that mental illness, alcohol and drug use, poor coping skills, are all contributory factors that lead people towards suicide in Sri Lanka. Services are therefore targeted towards helping people who fall into these categories. The fact that suicide is invariably the outcome of a combination of factors – environmental, psychological, sociological and biological is now accepted without debate.

People of all ages seek befriending from Sumithrayo for concerns that include marital, family, domestic violence, relationship issues, mental health, grief, loneliness and low self esteem. Having being set up by the Samaritans - Sumithrayo practices their unique way of non judgmental befriending. The key of which is active Listening.

The Caller unburdens and thereby ventilates while the volunteer listens and accepts the Caller unconditionally. The Caller is encouraged to explore and identify the feelings that have caused despair and distress. When a rapport is thus established and the Caller is more rational (with a better balance of head and heart), options are explored and discussed. The Caller is finally empowered to consider one or more of these options and seek relief from their present feelings. The goal of befriending is to empower the Caller to make life-enhancing choices. A Caller does not lose the freedom to make his own decisions, including the decision to take his own life, and is free to break contact at any time.

Sumithrayo is where they will find empathy instead of sympathy, empowerment instead of advice, and a non judgmental friend who will listen with the assurance of complete confidentiality. People who have been through such a crisis will confirm that it was huge relief to unburden their feelings and discovering options other than taking their lives.

Attempting Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event and is likely to have several inter related and complex causes. The single factor or event (like a scolding) is the trigger that causes unbearable pain coupled with the inability to cope any further and feelings of very low self-esteem. Thus, an attempt to end it all. Some of the problems that increase the risk of suicide are: Rejection in a relationship, Unbearable Grief, Heavy use/dependency on alcohol or other drugs, A disabling or terminal illness, History of earlier attempts or self harming, Depression, Mental Illness, Poor Coping skills. The biology of the brain, genetics, psychological traits, and social forces can all contribute to such feelings.

Another less publicized reason is that, dealing with human sexuality (associated with the facts of life) in an unsupportive family, community or hostile school environment can also bring about such feelings. As would the feelings of worthlessness and guilt soon after (or long after) a person has been sexually abused. The founder of “The Samaritans” Chad Vara was haunted by the following experience: Standing in at the funeral of a 14-year-old girl, he asked the undertaker why the girl was being buried in unconsecrated ground, and was told she had killed herself because she had mistaken menstruation for some sort of sexually transmitted disease.

Are there differences between men and women? More women than men say they have considered suicide - though more men actually take their own lives. Women talk about how they are feeling far more often than men. Women are also more likely than men to have stronger social networks, and to seek psychiatric and other medical support. Prospective volunteers do not need any special qualifications or experience to become a Sumithraya – just a willingness to listen in a caring, compassionate, nonjudgmental way.

Bereavement or grief due to suicide is experienced very differently from the mourning of a loss by natural causes. Stigma associated with suicide plays a big role and family and friends find it difficult to reach out and unsure of what words of comfort should be offered. As a result a wall of silence is built by friends, family and the community who may discuss the suicide in hushed tones amongst themselves. Survivors may go through feelings of guilt or blame that they were the cause or did not do the needful to prevent the suicide. They may choose to deal with it by denial or avoiding discussing it. If the grieving process is not allowed to proceed some survivors may place themselves at risk for suicide. It is very important that the bereaved seek assistance but the stigma often prevents them from seeking help.

Mel Medura (The Sumithrayo Drug Demand Reduction Program) is an ancillary that provides services with a well-established alcohol and drug demand reduction program of its kind. The specialty of it is that the help seekers are rehabilitated in their own environment rather than in an enclosed location. This is guided by a group of professionals both local and international and any person who seeks help can drop in. The unit is non-profit oriented and works at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of supply and demand reduction of harmful, dependence producing psychoactive drugs. However, greater emphasis is placed on the preventative rather than the curative aspects of a wide range of community concerns which tends to diminish health.

The media also needs to reduce or eliminate altogether the sensationalism associated with suicide reporting. They must avoid giving graphic details of the method used and avoid using words like "commit" (which makes it sound like a crime). Providing details of the mechanism and procedure used to carry out a suicide may lead to the imitation of suicidal behavior by other people at risk. Avoid simplistic explanations for suicide. Encourage public understanding of the complexity of suicide. Avoid labeling places as suicide 'hotspots'. Above all if a suicide help line is given at the end of the report it will help other vulnerable people with suicidal thoughts to make contact and prevent an impending suicide.

**SUMITHRAYO – Confidential Emotional Support from people who CARE. (A Free Service)
Open 365 days – from 9.00 a.m to 8.00 p.m (including Holidays).
Call us: 2692909, 2683555, 2696666 (Mel Medura: 2694665, 2693460, 0714307799)
Visit us: 60B Horton Place Colombo 7. (Mel Medura: 60 Horton Place)**