

SUMITHRAYO: 48 years of service to the community

by Sumithraya



“The most important thing in communications is to hear what isn’t being said” – Peter Drucker

Let's be honest, suicide is something that almost everyone thinks about at some point in their lives but only a few of us feel comfortable talking about. Yet talking about suicide--its causes, prevalence and risk factors as well as what people in crisis are experiencing--provides us with the best opportunity we have to prevent it and many of the other problems that are tied to this behavior. People experience suicidal feelings for countless reasons, some of them understandable, others very difficult to comprehend. But for the person in crisis, the thoughts and feelings they are experiencing tied to their depression are very real and can seem perfectly logical.

Chad Vara founded the Samaritans of London in 1953. When Joan Hamilton set off from London in 1971 to marry Lakdasa De Mel the first Bishop of Kurunegala, it set off a chain of events that culminated in the birth of Sumithrayo on 15th June 1974. A branch of the Samaritans, Sumithrayo first operated out of two rooms at the Ceylon Social Service League in Maradana. Later Joan and Lakdasa de Mel gifted their property in Horton Place and helped build the Center at 60B Horton Place. Chad Vara travelled from London to lay the foundation stone at 60B.

Like the Samaritans, Sumithrayo works to prevent suicide and support those who have lost someone to suicide. They are not only available for people experiencing suicidal crises, but also for those who are feeling sad, lonely, desperate, tormented or anxious. Here, those in need of emotional support are assured of finding empathy instead of sympathy; empowerment and a caring non-judgmental friend who would listen with complete confidentiality. It was the vision of the late Joan de Mel to provide these services free of charge.

Sumithrayo volunteers take every person in crisis seriously. Devoted to responding to people in crisis, focusing on empathetic active listening and non-judgmental responses, the goal of their befriending is to empower the caller to make life-enhancing choices. Barriers such as class, race, religion, political or sexual leanings are non-existent. Callers are provided with emotional support in an atmosphere of total confidentiality. The aim of befriending is to also help callers to find their own solutions or answers, where solutions or answers exist, not to offer external direction or advice. Active Listening pays an integral part of the process of befriending.

On a basic level, Active Listening takes the focus off of the helper and puts it on the person being helped (the person in crisis). In this way, active listening is not only a very effective form of communication, it also alleviates some of the isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem and feeling that *nobody cares*, that often accompanies bouts of depression. Active listening tells the person in crisis that what he/she is feeling is important and, by association, that he/she is deserving of our time and attention. For the person in crisis, being in communication with someone who is actively listening can be a calming and steadying influence. And most beneficial, it also assists that person in getting his/her feelings out in a safe and supportive environment, thereby acting as an all-important emotional pressure release valve, which is a “protective factor” in preventing suicide. A catharsis.

Taking a minute can change a life. People who have lived through a suicide attempt have much to teach us about how the words and actions of others are important. They often talk movingly about reaching the point where they could see no alternative but to take their own life, and about the days, hours and minutes leading up to this. They often describe realising that they did not want to die but instead wanted someone to intervene and stop them. Many say that they actively sought someone who would sense their despair and ask them whether they were okay.

Sometimes they say that they made a pact with themselves that if someone did ask if they were okay, they would tell them everything and allow them to intervene. Sadly, they often reflect that no one asked. Life is precious and sometimes precarious. Taking a minute to reach out to someone – a complete stranger or close family member or friend – can change the course of their life. Individuals who have come through an episode of severe suicidal thinking often say that they were not looking for specific advice, but that compassion and empathy from others helped to turn things around for them and point them towards recovery.

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.

At Mel Medura, (which is an ancillary of Sumithrayo established in 1984) located in an adjoining building on the same premises; volunteers identify those who are at risk of drug and alcohol dependence. People who come from all walks of life drop in to the centre for confidential support. The focus is on assisting those with substance dependence. Alcoholism and drug dependence are complex problems, with many related issues. And, although there is no magic formula to help someone stop his or her drinking or drug use, there is help available. Helping a loved one struggling with alcoholism or drug dependence can be heartbreakingly painful for families.

Trained befrienders at Mel Medura work with the substance user in a relaxed and friendly setting. His or her purpose is to find the root of the addiction and help them progress into sobriety. Depending on the underlying cause of the addiction discovered, the befriender develops an individual plan for each user. To help them work past the addiction, befrienders educate them about addiction and teach them how to move on through life without substance abuse. The main goal of the befriender is to guide the drug user or abuser into sobriety and a healthier life style.

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)

Email us: sumithra@sumithrayo.org melmedura@slt.net.lk