

# Rise in helpline calls as pandemic takes mental health toll

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NEW DELHI, MAY 24

THE ONSLAUGHT of the second wave of Covid and the resulting helplessness has been taking a toll on people's mental health, with helplines reporting a drastic rise in the number of calls.

"There has been a rise in people inflicted with helplessness, acute anxiety, panic, grief and guilt, and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) as they struggle to come to terms with the disaster," said Abdul Mabood, founder of the Delhi-based SNEHI foundation, which launched a Covid specific mental health helpline last April.

Over the past year, the helpline has been giving free counselling to those suffering from Covid-related mental health ailments. A team of seven trained professionals handles around 40 calls daily and has counselled over 7,000 people so far.

There seems to have been a clear shift in the number of calls about the trauma, grief and PTSD provoked due to the second wave. "After analysing the data since November, calls for help from those with suicidal tendencies have risen to 7% of the total, from a norm of 1%. Mostly, it is those who are suffering economic crisis and hopelessness — either the financial burdens have increased, or their ventures have been hit badly," said Mabood.

He said that when such a person calls, it is crucial to pull them out of their frame of mind. "We only inform authorities after their consent. The majority of the times, just talking to them for a long time about their feelings helps them come out of that frame of mind. The rule of thumb is that no one

wants to die — and the moment we hold on to them, they respond," he said.

"Young people, who went out and by chance infected family members, are calling up saying they feel guilty and remorseful," he said.

Sitting at home is also impacting people's health, as "they are unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel," he added.

Calls from PTSD and grief afflicted individuals, whose loved ones got infected or died due to Covid-19 have increased. "Many were unable to find beds or oxygen cylinders for infected family and the entire experience has left them traumatised and scarred, even if the patients recovered. And these are well-connected, moneyed people," he said.

A lot of calls, due to the reach of social media platforms, are also arriving from rural areas such as UP, MP and Bihar. "In villages where not much information is there, there is a sense of inability to comprehend what is going on. Last year, migrant workers were sent to quarantine in schools and shelter homes. This year there is nothing. There is panic and anxiety even among young people from rural areas and small towns, who ask if Delhi cannot handle the cases, how will they? Local doctors are also suffering," he said.

In May last year, when a national mental health helpline was launched, Dr Sanjeev Kumar M, one of the members who led the team of Centre for Disaster Management (psychological support) and registrar of the NIMHANS, Bengaluru, had told *The Indian Express* that anxiety, uncertainty, insomnia, loneliness, depression and panic attacks were the most common reactions to such a crisis.