

Tea And Empathy

In today's fast-paced world coping with the challenges of life has taken on new dimensions. We juggle a multitude of roles in our personal and professional lives and stretch ourselves to meet the demands of both. While we often rise to meet the challenges and crises that arise, there may be times when the ability to cope falters and predicaments lead to situations and emotions that feel out of our control. Everyone has these moments, says Sri Lanka Sumithrayo where understanding, empathy and emotional support towards positive thoughts and re-establishing self confidence are offered to all those in distress.

Having been set up in 1974 by the late Joan de Mel as a branch of the Samaritans, and currently as a branch of Befrienders Worldwide, Sri Lanka Sumithrayo seeks to give emotional support to those dealing with depression, anxiety, loneliness and other psychological challenges. While the primary purpose of Sumithrayo is to support those who are suicidal they hope to assuage feelings such as low self-esteem, despair and depression early on before they drive a person to consider taking their own lives.

This free service is delivered by a group of volunteers who are known as 'befrienders'. "Our volunteers are carefully selected for qualities such as kindness and caring and then put through a training programme," explains a senior volunteer at Sumithrayo, adding that befriending, as opposed to counselling, is the art of positive listening, with empathy and no judgement. "We focus on their strengths, encourage them to speak of their talents and the things that make them happy. We empower them to have a positive approach and help them see their worth as a member of society and their families."

At Sumithrayo, confidentiality is highly valued with volunteers working anonymously as far as possible. Those burdened by troubles that they cannot reveal to friends or family often find great relief in speaking to a befriender at Sumithrayo with the assurance of complete confidentiality as well as the freedom of no judgment on one's thoughts and deeds. "We are a friend. We welcome them to sit down, relax with a cup of tea and have a chat. That is the attitude," they explain, adding that once the caller has unburdened and regained some confidence, the befriender, together with the caller, looks at the situation and at different options as to how it could be resolved.

With workplace stressors such as coping with tight deadlines, limited staff and unexpected demands resulting in high levels of stress, often exacerbated by tensions within the home and family, increasing numbers of people are having to deal with negative thoughts and emotions on a larger scale than ever before. "Sometimes they come here so dejected that their thoughts are completely clouded and irrational," explains a volunteer at Sumithrayo. "Sometimes they are angry with their bosses, sometimes it is the bosses themselves who are having a hard time coping."

The calm and understanding attitude of the befriender often helps to lessen these emotions and pave the way for mental clarity. If the caller appears to be suicidal, volunteers will take down their contact numbers and keep in touch as well as try to contact someone close to him or her. Since the first 24 - 48 hours are crucial, they provide continuous support, sometimes even staying with them until midnight in order to ensure they are stable.

They also conduct programmes for organisations and businesses when requested. "We speak about the issues they face, strengths and possible options," they say, adding that they moreover, train people within the organisation to befriend within their context.

Another arm of Sumithrayo is its Drug Demand Reduction Programme, conducted at Mel Medura, located on the same premises as the Sumithrayo centre in Colombo. With substance abuse often resulting from depression, volunteers at Sumithrayo identify those who are at risk of or prone to alcohol or drug addiction, gently referring them to the programme. At Mel Medura services are rendered by a competent and specially trained team which makes no distinctions as to age or social status. Programmes are conducted under the guidance of specialist doctors and people from all walks of life drop-in for confidential support.

Furthermore, Sumithrayo conducts awareness and educational programmes that aim to change the attitudes of the community regarding suicide and to minimise the risk factors, changing harmful social practices in the community as a whole.

On September 10, World Suicide Prevention Day, Sumithrayo, along with the rest of the world will be lighting a candle at eight in the evening in memory of those who took their own lives. They invite those who have lost loved ones due to suicide.

“We are all prone to low self- esteem, isolation, rejection and depression at times,” they say, “and usually our coping skills are good enough to cope.” However, if things seem to be spiraling out of control, and feelings of depression and despair seem to be taking over your life, the Friends at Sumithrayo are just a drive, phone call or email away, and a cup of tea and empathy may be just the comfort and revival that you need.

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