

BMC student helpline witnesses decline in calls

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MUMBAI

March 11: The number of calls received by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's distress helpline has fallen from 1300 in January to 800 in February.

Counsellors say that the fall in numbers is part of a familiar trend which sees a rise just before and after the exams, but dips while they are on.

The Vandrevalla foundation's helpline, which was declared as the BMC's official helpline in January to tackle the alarming spate of suicides towards the end of 2009, fields distress calls from all age groups round

8-year-old is youngest distress caller

GAUTAM S. MENGLA

Feb. 12: The number of distress calls received by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's official helpline has gone up from a monthly average of 300 calls to a shocking 1,300 calls in January.

What has particularly worried the experts man-

ning the helpline is that out of the 1,300 calls fielded by the helpline last month, 61 per cent were from youngsters, with the youngest caller being an eight-year-old. The helpline has already received more than 400 calls in the first ten days of February and the figure is steadily rising.

The 24/7 helpline was set up by the Vandrevalla

Foundation, a non-profit organisation consisting of trained psychiatrists, in August last year. Following the spate of suicides towards the end of 2009, it was appointed as the BMC's official helpline in January this year.



Recalling the case of the 8-year old, Dr Arun John, director, Vandrevalla Foundation said, "The boy had called after seeing some of our awareness posters in his school. He said that he was scared to go home, and on being asked why, he said that his mother had told him to practice

three particular sums in mathematics, which he had not done. Coincidentally, all three sums appeared in the exam that day and he could not answer them. He was then afraid that he would be taken to task by both his mother and his teacher."

The professionals manning the helpline then spoke to his parents and teachers.

after which the boy went home. Incidentally, the helpline is manned at times by postgraduates in clinical psychology, who are trained to counsel people on the phone for 18 days before they can take a call. If a particular case seems to be serious, the call is transferred to senior psychiatrists who take the call. ■ Turn to Page 4



Dr Arun John

"The maximum number of calls is seen a few days before the exams. This trend continues until the day the exams begin. Then there is a period of respite while the exams go on."

**Dr Arun John
Vandrevalla foundation**

A grab of the story carried in the February 13 2010 issue of *The Asian Age*

the clock. The BMC approached the Vandrevalla foundation, as setting up a helpline from the scratch would have taken up a lot of time. Of the 801 calls received this year, 214 were from students anxious about their performance.

"Typically, the maximum number of calls is seen a few

days before the exams. This trend continues until the day the exams begin. Then there is a period of respite while the exams go on, after which the number of calls rises again," said Dr Arun John, director, Vandrevalla foundation.

However, following the spate of student suicides, the

number of parents and teachers calling the helpline has also gone up.

"We receive several calls from parents. Some of them express anxiety about the fact that their children are studying less than they should be, but they are afraid that scolding them could trigger rebellion or

depression. Others call up saying that they feel they are driving their children too hard, which makes them feel guilty. However, they feel that a critical time like the period just before exams might be the wrong time to be harsh with the children," Dr John said.

He added that some par-

get worried that their child might be slipping into depression," Dr John explained.

The helpline, which has been operational on a non-profit basis since August 2009, is manned by twelve certified clinical psychologists who have been trained to counsel people over the phone. The helpline has tie-ups with ambulance services as well as the local police across the city, and in case of emergencies, they provide whatever help is required.

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