

The *Moneylife* Team looks at Vandrevala Foundation that deals with mental health

mind care FOR MENTAL HELP

In a crowded city like Mumbai, it is not uncommon to see someone suffering from dyslexia or a mental health disorder. But most people know little about mental health issues unless a close friend or family member suffers from a disorder. Do you know that there are 43 mental health hospitals in India, all set up before 1947? A National Human Rights Commission study says: There are only two kinds of hospitals. The first are 'dumping grounds' for families to abandon their mentally ill member, for either economic reasons or a lack of understanding and awareness of mental illness. The second type of hospitals provides basic living amenities but the treatment focuses on managing patients rather than enhancing their living skills. In addition, there is the stigma associated with mental illnesses and, often, a refusal to acknowledge a problem. Yet, "a massive 8%-10% of the population apparently suffers from major or minor mental illness," says Dr Arun John, executive vice president of the Vandrevala Foundation.

"When we started out with a mission to improve mental health in India over a year ago, we were hoping to write cheques to a couple of non-government organisations (NGOs), be able to review their results four times a year and pat ourselves on the back for making a difference. What ensued was a discovery of the dark corners of disease, the discrimination and the realisation that we had no idea about what we were trying to achieve, let alone how to do it," says Priya Hiranandani Vandrevala, chief executive officer of Hirco PLC, a real-estate investment company.

Founded and fully funded by Priya and Cyrus Vandrevala, the Vandrevala Foundation began operations on 3 August 2009 by launching 'The Mental Health Initiative'. As a first step, it launched a 24x7 mental health helpline. Its mission is to create community-based mental health services, increase awareness of mental health, provide access to improved treatment to every individual irrespective of economic status and enable patients

and their families the opportunity for recovery and reintegration into society.

Dr John says, "We are looking for strategic partners—corporates, like-minded individuals or NGOs with the same goals to help us in our endeavour." Interestingly, the Vandrevala Foundation says it is a not-for-profit that works like a 'for-profit' organisation, but for social profits, not economic gains.

"Preventive action is possible and necessary for physical illness, but there is no such thing for mental illness," says Dr John. So the Foundation runs a 24x7 helpline (022-2570 6000) to counsel people in need. It also has senior psychiatrists available for acute psychiatric emergency or complex issues. It helps arrange free ambulance services; helps arrange admissions to mental-care facilities; and follows up to track the status of mentally-ill persons to ensure that they stick to treatment. It arranges meetings with psychiatrists. The idea behind the helpline is the realisation that often people know they need help, but don't know who to turn to.

The Vandrevala Foundation also supports entrepreneurial, social-sector start-ups which local governments are unable, or unwilling, to fund. The Foundation plans to expand its helplines to Pune, Nashik and Nagpur. "The ultimate goal is a pan-India presence," says Dr John. Currently, the Foundation has 12 clinical psychologists as well as five mid-level and four senior psychiatrists on its rolls. It also has a network of 70 psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors all over Mumbai who support the cause. It has students who can communicate in English, Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati manning the helplines. It has two tiers of psychiatrists who look into mental illness cases, depending on the severity of affliction. It also plans to set up crisis management face-to-face counselling and support groups and to upgrade mental hospitals in Maharashtra.

If you know of someone who needs help, you can call or email the Vandrevala Foundation. ■

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