

## A shocker: 16,000 student suicides in three years

Over 16,000 school and college students in India committed suicide in the last three years, says the health ministry, shedding light once again on the sorry state of mental healthcare in the country.

As per the ministry, 5,857 students committed suicide in 2006 and the figure for 2005 was 5,138. Similarly, in 2004, 5,610 students committed suicide.

'We know about the gravity of the situation and are going to re-strategise the national mental health programme,' Anbumani Ramadoss told IANS.

Experts, doctors and even the World Health Organisation (WHO) believe that a multi-pronged strategy needs to be put in place to tackle problems ranging from anxiety, depression, stress and finally suicidal tendencies.

Cherian Verghese, a specialist with WHO India, said: 'The mental health system needs an overhaul. Our schools might be giving good education but we need education in life skills. From counselling to increasing the number of mental health workers, the strategy should be holistic.'

'Students are a vulnerable group. Age, competition and relations in the family are all contributing to the growing cases of suicide among schoolgoers,' Verghese said.

He said some private schools in India had started appointing counsellors but 'government schools across the country need to make a move now'.

'There is a gamut of problems; India lacks the required number of psychiatrists as well. The social taboo around mental health also fuels the problem. A country which houses a huge number of youngsters must not take mental health lightly,' Verghese added.

He said since India faces a lot of natural disasters and deaths thereof, the country needs a brigade of social counsellors. Their job is to counsel people during post-disaster trauma disorder.

Nimesh Desai, a leading psychiatrist in the national capital, said: 'India needs a 10-fold increase in the number of psychiatrists. Across the country, there are not more than 3,500 such professionals.'

'The doctor-patient ratio, social stigma, growing competition and the desire to succeed in every field are leading to a higher level of anxiety, stress and acute depression,' Desai said.

Health ministry officials said the mental health programme in India would be revamped. Under the new plan, regional mental health institutes would be established.

All mental health hospitals would be modernised and the district authorities would be asked to go for community mental health services, life skill education and counselling would be introduced in schools.

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