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MEGHNA MAJUMDAR

We shouldn't have to wait for a celebrity to die to talk about suicide but music icon Chester Bennington's death does wake us up to the fact that we must acknowledge it as a problem and talk about it.

Suicide and suicide prevention is once more in the news after Bennington's death of earlier this month. Twitter was flooded with stories of how his songs made people feel less alone. Feeling less alone helps. In fact, there are quite a few things that help.

Aasra (Hotline: 22-27546669), meaning support, is a suicide helpline that handles calls from across the country. They usually get about 180 calls in 24 hours, from students, farmers, senior citizens amongst others. These are all people seeking help.

"Upto 80% of those contemplating it are not sure if they want to die. Suicide is an ambivalent emotion," says Dr Lakshmi Vijayakumar, Chennai-based psychiatrist, World Health Organization fellow and founder of Sneha (Hotline: 044 2464 0050), a suicide prevention centre. Reaching out through a helpline, to friends and family, or even asking for professional advice, helps. "If someone expresses their desire to take their lives, don't brush it off as a tantrum or attention-seeking behaviour; look at it as a cry for help," says Dr V Senthil Kumar Reddi, Additional Professor, Department of Psychiatry, NIMHANS, Bengaluru.

What to look out for

Dr Vijayakumar says that as many as 60-70% tend to communicate suicide feelings verbally. While the behavioural signs – anxiety, withdrawal, a sudden absence of self-care and giving away of prized possessions – might be difficult to gauge, the verbal signs are easily noticeable. So, if you hear things like, "What is the point of living?" or "I wish I could



go to sleep and not wake up," note that these are warning signs.

What to do

Little steps can go a long way. Dr Vijayakumar suggests things like ensuring they get adequate sleep. Just be around them, make them feel understood and wanted. People going through this are dealing with a lot of emotion, she explains, "Think of a pressure cooker: if a lot of tension builds up, you need to let it out gradually.

Baby steps relieve them of the stress slowly and constantly." The intensity isn't constant. "A person cannot be acutely suicidal for six months. The body can't physically take it. The strong urge can stay for two to three weeks: in that time, if support is mobilised, suicide can be prevented."

What not to do

You will naturally feel the urge to comfort them. But, according to Dr Vijayakumar, what you want to say is secondary. What is most im-

portant is your loved one's need to express, and to feel that someone is willing to listen. "Advice usually starts pouring in from everywhere. But no one is willing to hear them out, partly because what they have to say is difficult to hear," says Dr Vijayakumar. While you may feel they need professional help, offer it by way of support, and go with them if they'd like that.

The reasons why

Factors that trigger suicidal

thoughts are many and complex, and there's no single cause: "While data from the West suggests that 90% of suicides were by people who suffered from mental illness, data in the Indian sub-

continent indicates that there was only a 40% presence of mental illness. Here, we find that unexpected setbacks in life, such as education stress, financial problems and relationship breakdowns are other factors. Aggressive, impulsive behaviour are also risk factors," he says. The basic feelings that a person contemplating suicide grapples with are hopelessness, helplessness and loneliness. They feel a need to escape this triad, but this escape doesn't need to be drastic at all.

Paying tribute Fans gather at Revolution monument, Mexico City, to mourn Chester Bennington, Linkin Park frontman

REUTERS



SURVIVOR SPEAK

Pooja Sen (name changed to protect identity) has attempted suicide twice in her 40 years. The first time, she'd relocated for a partner she realised was cheating on her. Her family disowned her too. "When the centre of your world crumbles, you feel you have no option," she says. She survived then, but a decade-and-a-half and another broken relationship later, she was going to try it again. "This time, I called friends over. They constantly checked in on me, took me out to do routine things – a walk, a movie. A psychologist friend checked in on me every night. I surrounded myself with people who were there. Another thing that helped was a run. When you're on the verge of suicide and your adrenaline is running high, just put on your shoes and go out. I ran-walked for 2 hours, and once I came back I needed to shower and eat, and the feeling went away," she says. She talks of stepping out for a walk each time she feels low in life, even if not suicidal, because it distracts and invariably makes you feel better. "Later, I thought about what it would have done to my family, though at the time you're not really thinking about that, and I realised it's unfair to put the responsibility of your death on anyone else. You may not want to do that, but it will invariably happen."

The desi version of a healthy soup

Kanji or kanji water made of different rice varieties offers not just nutrition but also a lot of comfort

SREEDEVI LAKSHMI KUTTY

Now that the rains are making their reluctant appearance, I long for kanji (rice gruel). It evokes memories of our annual childhood holiday in a small village on the banks of the Periyar river in Kerala. We were 18 grandchildren and, almost every year, at least a dozen would gather to spend time with our grandparents. So kanji for dinner was the only feasible option.

At 7.30 pm, we would line up on a mat on the floor. The steel plates and spoons fashioned out of jackfruit leaves would be laid out. We were served two ladles of hot red rice kanji, a blob of coconut chutney and green gram poriyal on a small strip of banana leaf set beside the plate. While the jar of salt mixed with water went around, we would try to get a bite of each other's pappadam. After dinner, my aunt would pour water into the leftover kanji, if any, and keep it in an earthen pot. This, along with some pickle or leftover gravy stored in a kalchatti, was next morning's breakfast for the adults.

My aunt reminisced, "The kanji would be of Chitteni, Onattan, Vatton, Navara or Erumakkari red rice – grown, parboiled and milled, bran mostly intact. Everything, ex-



A delicious treat Kanji made with red rice and served with green gram poriyal and pickle • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

cept the pappadam made by a neighbouring family, was cultivated and processed by us. I don't think many farmers grow these paddy varieties now."

The preferred mid-morning drink/meal was kanji water flavoured with a little salt and pickle. Before pressure cooking came into vogue, rice was cooked in an open vessel with lots of water, which was then drained into another vessel and kept aside. Passers-by would ask for kanji water if they stopped for a drink.

Kanji made with different varieties of rice tastes different. Red rice kanji is arguably the best. But I have recently fallen love with kanji made with Ilupai poo samba (a white rice) and semi-polished karuppu kavuni black rice (almost purple in colour and rich in taste). We use coconut chutney, roasted gram chutney, tuvar chutney, ridge gourd thuaiyal or any of the nu-

merous chutneys that are an integral part of the South Indian cuisine. Kanjis can also be flavoured with steamed greens like moringa leaves and curry leaves or cooked along with green gram. Kanji is usually made of broken rice, as it gets cooked faster.

Three years ago, when we were visiting organic seed saver paddy farmers in Karnataka we stayed with Nandish, an innovative rice farmer. We had a wonderful surprise in the morning: a small bowl of leftover rice was mixed with buttermilk and chopped onions and accompanied by another bowl of sprouted groundnuts, green gram and Bengal gram. Nandish said, "The only thing better than this is the water in which the rice was soaked. This is the best source of Vitamin B12 for vegetarians."

Red rice kanji and kanji water are used extensively in Ayurveda as part of the diet and during treat-

ment. According to Ayurveda practitioners, kanji cures fatigue, removes toxins, stimulates the appetite and helps facilitate bowel movements. In Kerala, medicinal kanjis, prepared using medicinal rice like Navara, Raktasali and herbs, are consumed during Aadi (Karkidakam).

I see adoption of kanji and kanji water as a way to rediscover our own version of healthy soups instead of chasing artificially flavoured soups. Why don't we introduce it to our children on a rainy evening in a soup bowl, with some roasted pappadam crisps or and green gram on the side? They may actually surprise us and enjoy it.

Sreedevi Lakshmi Kutty is the Co-Founder of Bio Basics, a social venture retailing organic food and a Consultant to the Save Our Rice Campaign. Contact her at 9790516500

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