

Mass family suicide bid of mentally-ill kid rare

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CHENNAI: Shocking as it was that a family of four attempted to end their lives in a booked hotel room in Triplicane on Thursday night, after planning it for a while, the fact that their suicide note-to-be reportedly read that they were taking this drastic step because of their daughter's mentally afflicted condition has put a frightening complexion on the whole incident.

Despite the 3-year-old child dying in the suicide bid, while the others managed to survive, experts in mental health clearly state that a case of this nature is exceptionally rare.

"Suicides of care-givers and family are generally decreasing these days, but mass family suicides are a very rare occurrence," asserts Dr R Kumar, Director of the Institute of Mental Health. This is supported by data supplied by the NCRB that shows that with over 8,500 mentally ill persons having committed suicide last year, the number of recorded family suicides in India, especially in TN, are very low.

While most city-based psychologists and doctors have attributed the suicide bid to economic constraints and social stigma, the fact that the father was the owner of a welding shop and had his son studying in a posh school in MRC Nagar easily contradicts that notion.

"Though poverty and mental illness coming together indicate a large degree of marginalisation in India, it cannot be taken for granted that people from a poorer section of society are more apt to taking desperate steps when they are saddled with mentally challenged children," opines Vandana Gopikumar, co-founder of The Banyan, an NGO that works with mentally ill destitute women. She goes on to recount inspiring instances where people from very poor economic backgrounds have provided for children with severely retarded growth and managed to raise them successfully.

Reflecting on the stigma that is believed to have driven the couple, Kaniappan (38) and Devanayagi (29), to have planned and executed the suicide bid, Dr Kumar says that most often the caregiver (parent/relative) is frustrated over social inhibitions. "Even with parents who take their children to special schools and undergo counselling, there is this inherent hope that their children will be 'normal' some day," says Dr Kumar, who adds, "They have to understand that what their children have is a deficiency and not a disease."

Vandana elaborates that though stigma occurs at various levels of life, it cannot alone push the caregiver to suicide. Rather, "a state of depression stemming from constant chronic pain" might just do it, she feels.

While police remain guarded on what charges are to be levelled against the parents who survived with their son Santosh, one thought remains unanimous: a more accessible mental health care and rehabilitation network at a district or even village level can help stem such incidents.

This can become a reality with a revamped mental health policy, reveals Vandana, who also adds that support groups for caregivers of mentally challenged persons is something that is easy to set up but will make a world of difference.

