

[Suicide Center Fights for Life In Trinidad](#)

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## Suicide Center Fights for Life In Trinidad

Paras Ramoutar, Trinidad

Under the leadership of Pundit Rambachan, Hindus established the first suicide prevention center in the Caribbean at the El Sorroco Mandir in San Juan, Trinidad. The National Hindu Lifeline/Suicide Prevention Center (NHL/SPC) opened in September 1993 after four years of work to fulfill Pundit's vision for creating "a venue where Hindus can feel safe, knowing they are coming to familiar territory." Like Canada and Malaysia, where East Indians reportedly have the highest problem rate in "in-house" social diseases-family crises, wife and child abuse, etc.-Trinidad follows suit in the area of suicide. Twice as many East Indian girls kill themselves compared to other ethnic groups.

Citing government neglect of the problem, Dr. Hari D. Maharajh, specialist in psychiatry and nervous disorders, feels the NHL/SPC is timely. Statistics indicate that from 1981 to 1990, there has been an astonishing 100-plus percent increase in suicide. The rate for Trinidad and Tobago is now 13.8 per 100,000. Suicide has become the leading cause of death for young persons 15 to 24 years of age. He says, "Each year, an estimated 169 persons die by suicidal acts in this country. An equal number are unreported or wrongly reported for a variety of reasons."

Dr. Maharajh says the causes of suicide and attempted suicide in Trinidad and Tobago are lover's quarrels, interpersonal problems, cultural rigidity, marginalization, ethnic disadvantages, poverty, unemployment and family depression. "Alcoholism and drug abuse are also major contributory factors. Imitation suicide or copy-cat suicide has been of recent interest provoked by images in the media and their impact on life styles. A study of the effects of mass media news stories on suicide has demonstrated that publicized models do indeed affect the suicide rate, particularly among young people. This deadly disorder has not received the attention, research effort or educational thrust afforded so many other disorders, despite the fact that recognition of risk population and intervention can

save thousands of lives. Why has the government been dragging its feet on this major social problem?" he challenged.

Dr. Maharajh feels that suicide is a national dilemma which has destroyed some of Trinidad's most vital young people in the prime of life. He said that there are definite ethnic differences, and all the evidence indicates that young East Indian females are more likely to attempt suicide than any other group. There were no difference between African and East Indian males, while the ratio of East Indian females to African females was 2 to 1. NHL/SPC Hindus are now meeting the challenge of this social problem. Pundit Rambaran said that this is an intersectoral effort with pundits, doctors and social workers. NHL/SPC has 24 full-time counselors who have undergone 60 hours of training and offer counseling an average of 30 times per day. He added that it costs in excess of US\$3,610 per month to run the center, the bulk of which comes from grants, donations and other service organizations like the Foundation for Enlightenment and Enriched Living (FEEL) and drug companies.

Dr. John Bharath, Public Relations Officer of the center, former member of Parliament, said that approximately 500 persons are given counselled every month, since the center came into being last September. "I cannot venture to say how many of them would have committed suicide, but what I can say is that the majority of them came back to us expressing deep satisfaction and gratitude for putting back into their minds and hearts a sense of self-worth, love, a caring disposition and human dignity once again." Davan Ramkisson, a beneficiary of the center, said that because of the assistance he received, "I am putting my life back into order." Zina Atwaroo, counselor, reports that she has had "to talk to some people who came to our center for hours to assure them that their problems are just mundane ones and that with proper and careful parental guidance their problems would be solved."

Dr. Bharath said that when Pundit Rambachan discussed the idea with him he immediately embraced it because, "some people in the Indian community are not comfortable going out and talking over their problems with people or organizations they do not know comprehensively."

"The Hindu woman is very apprehensive when it comes to speaking about her family problems or difficulties in her marriage," says Pundit Rambachan. "She may prefer to stay in her home and pine away with her problems and do nothing about them. The response is very, very good. Many of our calls are not only people with

suicidal tendencies, but people who want prayers said for them, or who want advice on different aspects of human life or who wish to speak to a priest. We thought it would be very apt if we opened a suicide prevention and counseling center in a Hindu temple, where a Hindu can feel safe in coming to a religious organization they are familiar with and see familiar faces-for example their family priest, like myself. We don't treat only Hindus or Indians. We treat people of every creed and every culture."

Vishnu Rambaran, center manager, says NHL/SPC is non-profit, non-governmental and serves the public, regardless of ethnic, social, cultural and religious persuasions. Center activities include a national lifeline service, walk-in center for suicide prevention, free distribution of groceries, food and clothing, free medical service, legal advice and spiritual counselling. "We also attend to problems relating to drug abuse, crisis in marriages, rape and incest, teenage pregnancy, delinquent and difficult children and family values," Rambaran said.

Pundit Ramesh Tiwari, President of the Edinburgh Hindu Temple, feels that anyone who attempts or actually commits suicide is throwing away the better part of their human existence. "Hinduism teaches that those who commit suicide are not following the dictum of their religion. God has given life and no one must take it away, but Him," he said. "Man has been pre-ordained for a special assignment on earth. Failure to execute that assignment through the short cut method of suicide will mean that that individual would have to come back on earth through lower forms of life," Pundit Tiwari said. In support of NHL/SPC he added, "This is a commendable and an historic effort that deserves the support of all men of goodwill who know and love life." He said that the Edinburgh Hindu Temple is looking at a similar project to ease the heavy burden of the El Socorro Mandir.

Dr. Maharajh told Hinduism Today, "The psychologically weak and emotionally disturbed in our society are in need of support and counselling in a similar manner as Arjuna who lost control at Kurukshetra and was unwilling to do his duty. He needed guidance from Lord Krishna, the protector. The changing role of the pundit today emphasizes work (karma yoga), devotion (upasana) and know-ledge (jnana). Under the spiritual guidance of Pundit Rambachan, members of the NHL/SPC have discussed the despair, frustration and hopelessness individuals felt for themselves and their families in our society."

By all accounts the National Hindu Lifeline/Suicide Prevention Center, San Juan,

Trinidad, has successfully integrated temple activities with social service, which reminds one of an ancient inscription to be found on the walls of a Karnataka temple of the Kalamukha sect: "a place devoted to the observances of Saiva saints leading perpetually the life of celibate religious students, a place for the quiet study of four Vedas,...the Yoga Sastras and the other kinds of learning, a place where food is always given to the poor, the helpless and to mendicants and all beggars,...a place where many helpless sick people are harbored and treated, a place of assurance of safety for all living creatures.

Send inquiries to: National Hindu Lifeline/Suicide Prevention Center, El Sorroco Mandir, San Juan, Trinidad and Tobago.