

STRENGTHEN THE FAMILY AND PREVENT SUICIDE

P.O.George

That the family is one of the most important determinants of a person's emotional life needs no explanation. A family life characterized by affection, respect and concern for each other will go a long way in building emotionally stable personalities. Conversely, any family dominated by selfishness, suspicion, lack of respect for each other, mutual hatred, and acrimony will lead to severe emotional distress. The family, which should have been a reservoir of support and care itself becoming a source of stress and unhappiness to its members should be treated as most tragic. Unfortunately, this is becoming more common in Kerala. This is borne out by the increasing number of divorces taking place in our state. It has been reported that more than 6500 divorce petitions are filed in the family courts in the state every year. Those who live apart without actually seeking judicial divorce, or those who live in the same house without actually being emotionally united are also on the increase. This is in fact, a far cry from the caring and supportive system, which rallied round the person in difficulty and distress.

The family tradition in Kerala:

Kerala society has been known for the close links existing in the family. The extended family, which has been the norm in the state, was noticed for the presence of members belonging to several generations bonded together. It always had space for the distressed and had mechanisms to redress personal animosities. Each one could find one or other member to be close to and to ventilate feelings, thus preventing things coming to a head at any point of time.

The extended family leaves behind a unique legacy. One very interesting tradition is that the married sons while living separate with their respective

(This article has been taken from the book entitled ***Lest He Should Kill Himself*** by the author)

families or married daughters living away would keep constant touch with their parents and brothers and sisters and make regular visits to the ancestral homes (*tharavad*). On occasions like weddings, birthday celebrations, or religious festivals all family members would come together and celebrate. Similarly, in difficult times like hospitalization, childbirth, accident, death in the family or any misfortune, it was the family members who would rally round the distressed individuals to help to tide over the hard times. Assistance like personal presence, physical help when needed, and financial support were among the services being provided time and again. Lending money without charging any interest has been a spontaneous practice prevalent among family members and friends. The money so borrowed would usually be returned as promised. But in cases of default of payment due to genuine financial disability, the willingness to write off such loans as a goodwill measure towards a distressed member of the family was also not unusual. Similarly, lending of food items, seeds, or agricultural implements also was in vogue. The supportive family circle was indeed a cushion to those in distress.

The scenario has drastically changed. At present, nearly 85 per cent of Kerala's families are nuclear and further disintegration continues. The number of single parent families is also on the increase and presently they constitute an estimated 2 per cent. Extended families account for the remaining 13 per cent. In addition to the structural changes taking place in the family, cracks have appeared in the support system also. Visits to the ancestral homes have often been restricted to formal occasions. Enquiries over the telephones about the health and well being of the old parents and family members have become the order of the day. Not many are willing to offer financial support to the other family members in debt trap or other difficult situations, and assistance in times of distress also is not forthcoming. There is an urgent need to build up adequate support systems.

Supportive Neighbourhood:

Another major feature of the traditional Kerala family was the supportive neighbourhood system enveloping it. The people living in the vicinity of the family

would form an organic whole and freely interact with each other. Many such families would have the same family name and claim similar ancestral background. These affiliations were seen as an added reason to offer help while in need. It was also noticed that these neighbourhood groups also shared commonality of religious affiliations. Some of the major characteristics of these neighbourhoods were the following:

- Practically every member, especially the children had easy access to the other families in the neighbourhood,
- Children grew up in the company of other children of the same age group and learned to give and take,
- The women built up social relationships across families which provided for social interactions and support in cases of need,
- Everyone knew the happenings in the family excepting the very personal ones. The grapevine and the gossip mill also would be active,
- Elders and the people with expertise offered their counsel and support freely and readily. This practice became handy while constructing houses, selecting jobs, deciding on the educational institutions, holding marriage negotiations, accessing health care services etc.
- The children, the sick, the disabled, the elderly were secure in the neighbourhood and vulnerable people never felt insecure or threatened, and
- There was a great deal of community policing to prevent miscreants causing damage to the life and property of the people.

This kind of family system of yester years and the neighbourhood groups have been breached. The members now come together occasionally but do not share resources as they used to do in olden days. Each family seems to live in a routine of their own with their employment related problems, children's education, health concerns, and financial matters taking precedence. There is a great deal of competition and one-upmanship between families and the competition is more

often demonstrated in acquiring consumer goods like ostentatious houses, flashy clothes, trendy ornaments, or the latest model conveyance. Children's education also has become a major instrument for demonstrating one's superiority. It has become a prestige symbol among families causing a great deal of tension and distress.

It has been observed that in the place of rather closed family related groupings of yester years, profession based class groupings have emerged. The formation of extended neighbourhoods has been supported by the housing colonies where the staff from the same institution or department live side by side. The residents' associations have been active in most housing colonies. These extended neighbourhoods have a great deal of social interaction and support for each other. Sometimes the members organize picnics and get-togethers to further strengthen such association. But it should be admitted that it is still a far cry from the family based neighbourhoods of yester years.

Disintegration of the extended family and the natural neighbourhood:

The extended families have scattered or divided themselves into smaller nuclear families. The factors, which have contributed to this state of affairs, are many. They are also related to the present history of the state. Some of the important such factors are the following:

- ❑ More and more people seek jobs away from their native villages and migration to locations closer to the work stations of one or both partners has become necessary,
- ❑ Those who migrate to the urban areas for the benefit of children's education are increasing by the day. Such migration to stay within the reach of schools outside the village starts from the preprimary stage onwards and continues up to professional education,
- ❑ Non-availability of domestic help places the burden of all family chores on the members themselves. Sharing of such burden by the husband and wife would

make it enjoyable. But it would be difficult, boring, and time consuming when one person is forced to carry it out single handedly.

- The new family order has to struggle for money, time, space, and manpower to carry out responsibilities like care of the elderly, disabled, or chronically ill persons. Not having time to visit friends and relatives and attend social and religious functions is a regular complaint. It is also difficult to find living space for the elderly or disabled members, and consequently they used to get isolated or discriminated against.

Fast paced life:

The newer families live a fast life in comparison with the peaceful and slow life in the villages. It is not any more the slow, careful, protected and assisted walk through the known thoroughfares, but a fast, reckless, adventurous race through uncharted routes in little known territories. It is a fast paced life and getting ahead is becoming difficult for an increasing number of people. This is true even for children who have almost all their waking hours programmed for school, tuition, and homework. Women who carry out the strenuous responsibilities of the housewife, in addition to career responsibilities often find that 24 hours is insufficient in a day. Those who commute long distances daily to office and back are many. The hectic pace of life has affected the social and personal life of almost all Keralites. The under educated, out dated, disabled, distressed and agonizing often find life an uphill task, difficult to scale without external support and patronage. But they often find that there is none to help out in times of difficulty.

Distress signals:

A family, like any living organism, develops problems over a period of time. It is not difficult to identify families that are healthy and capable of providing for emotional stability and harmony. An unhealthy family, on the other hand will result in ill health and disintegration. It is not unlikely that the disintegration of the family will lead to suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, and violence. Given in Table 1 below is a checklist to assess the health of one's family.

Table 1: Characteristics of healthy and unhealthy families.

Characteristics of a healthy family	Characteristics of an unhealthy family
A general climate of warmth, trust, concern and belongingness.	The general climate of despair, distrust, and suspicion
Every member feels wanted. Even temporary absence becomes painful.	The members find no joy in being together. Long absence from home welcomed.
Husband and wife sharing the household chores like cooking, cleaning, and washing.	Women forced to carry out all the domestic chores, while men rest, relax, or watch the favorite television programmes.
Distinctive preference for the food cooked by one's mother, wife etc. "My-mother-is-the-best-cook-in-the world" - feeling.	No special preference for delicacies made at home. Always complaining about home cooked food.
The children living in hostels counting days to the weekend to return home.	Those staying in hostels and work stations avoid coming home for weekends.
Both parents spending time with the children. Everyone is allowed sufficient rest and relaxation.	Children given a tight schedule of homework, extra-curricular activities, and tuitions and denied rest and relaxation.
The family eats together, prays together and feels happy being together.	The family avoids eating together, praying together or celebrating together.
Everyone concerned about the health of the other members and willing to spend time with the sick, disabled or elderly members to provide tender, loving care.	The old, sick, and disabled members get little attention and care. They find themselves helpless and hopeless.
When one goes through any kind of distress all others rally round and help out	Each one is left to himself to deal with his problems, others generally ignoring him.
The older parents feel wanted and comfortable. They are well cared for.	Older people find themselves neglected and remain unhappy and complaining.
---	The members of the family take alcohol, drugs and tobacco.
---	Partners finding sexual life boring or forcibly undertaken in order to prevent violence and harm. Marital infidelity not

	infrequent.
---	The family is in the debt-trap and finds it difficult to manage daily expenses.
---	Occasional outbursts and swearing at each other. One or other talking about suicide.
---	The family loses its place of respect in the community and is referred to with disregard by neighbours.

Tying oneself in knots:

The following is a typical situation. Sumesh, 38 years old, is a bank officer living in the city with his wife and two children, aged 12 and 9. He shifted to the city only about two years ago to 'provide for his children's education'. Raji, Sumesh's wife is a teacher in an unaided English medium school. She earns a comparatively poor salary and works long hours. Sumesh had a motorbike in his early days with the bank. Subsequently, he acquired a Maruti 800, which he later changed for a Hyundai Sandro Zip Drive. The loss incurred over the change over to the new car is 'negligible.' According to him, "Prestige comes first." Raji was happy too. She was one of the few teachers who owned a car! The car was taken on loan from the financing company, which was willing to provide help with no sureties and no guarantees. "Instant Loan"- they call it. Sumesh and Raji thanked their stars for the financing company. "But for them we would still be moving around in the 800!" Sumesh paid the first instalment in time. The second too. Soon he found it hard to keep the dates. Each delayed day brought heavy penal interest. Several instalments had been delayed and there were five of them due at one point of time. The financiers threatened seizure of the vehicle.

As the days went by Sumesh and Raji found themselves blaming each other and frequently quarrelling. Gradually the communication between them became rare. There were days together when the conversation between them hardly went beyond "yes" and "no". Sumesh started getting back home late. On reaching home, he would feel more comfortable retiring into his drawing room, watching

his favourite television channels. He started drinking, too. The children would spend their time doing their homework, watching television, or sleeping.

Raji hardly had any free time. Her day would start at 5.0 a.m. and end by 11 p.m. She had to spend a considerable part of her time in the kitchen cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes. Before her marriage she was not used to doing the domestic chores. The children did their homework while she was busy in the kitchen. It was difficult to supervise the children and do cooking at the same time. "Lately their grades have slipped. But what can I do?"- She mused. "I hardly ever get any help from my husband. I too would have liked to watch the television but for Sumesh who had his favourite channels", she went on. She was quite unhappy with her personal existence. One of her major personal problems was that she did not find anyone to talk to. "No one has time. Everyone is busy." she lamented. Her friends started finding her edgy and getting emotional for even small things. She became very irritable and seen getting angry with the children, and others.

Her employers have informed her that she would not be able to continue in the same school from the following academic year as it was "the policy of the management not to allow the teachers three consecutive terms." That much money less, how to pay off the loans?

Sumesh wanted to talk to someone about what went on in his mind. "Raji," he felt "can't understand my problems." He also found that his friends, neighbours, and relatives were avoiding him. Several people knew that he was in trouble. They avoided him because they were afraid that he would ask for money. "I wish I had my sister" – he lamented for his sister who died some years back. He felt that he was alone in the world. Had there been someone who could allow him to ventilate himself, he could work out things, he felt. 'There is no light at the end of the tunnel' he was convinced.

Sumesh had been thinking of calling it a day for some time. “Why continue with this painful existence?” he argued. “How will I pay off the loans? How can I tell my wife and children about the personal loans I have taken? Imagine being attacked by the moneylenders’ goons? Imagine the car being seized as threatened by them? How do I face my colleagues and friends? It is definitely better to die with honour than live in disrepute and indignity. It is easy to take an overdose of tablets. People will take it for a heart attack! None would know. I can do this on the day when Raji and children will be away attending a family function.” These were his thoughts for some time.

Sumesh and Raji have several problems:

- Both Sumesh and Raji found life difficult and would often say ‘Fed up!’
- The family was in disarray. Husband and wife hardly ever talked to each other.
- The children found both the parents irritable, and uncaring. “Mom and dad have no time for us” both of them would tell each other.
- Sumesh took to drinks and it was on the increase.
- His manager had warned him for habitual late attendance and negligence of duty.
- Sumesh had major financial problems and the car was soon to be taken away.
- He had kept himself away from the neighbourhood and not been socializing much.
- He had been losing sleep. The liquor he took did not help him sleep!
- Raji too had sleepless nights and been very moody and withdrawn. She was aware that friends avoided her.
- Her interest and care in teaching had been slowly vanishing and parents of her students had started complaining.
- The children’s grades in the school had been slipping and teachers have started asking questions.

- Friends and relatives have been noticing unpleasantness in the life and behaviour of Sumesh and Raji.

Even while thinking about committing suicide Sumesh found that he did not actually want to die. Left to himself he would not think of killing himself. There was a lot more of life left in him, he thought. At the same time, Sumesh was aware of the odds piled up against him and that he had 'no other option'. There was no help forthcoming from anyone. Neither his relations, nor friends were willing to help. He also did not find his own means adequate to see off his troubles. He could not think of disposing off the car, for fear of the embarrassment it caused. The thought of death made him sad. But in the situation he was in, he was unable to see any other possibility. He was unable to identify the several resources he had at his command, and the help he was able to mobilize from his friends and relatives. The only way to escape from the encircling darkness was to take his own life, according to his arguments.

Unlike in the case of Sumesh and Raji there are several situations pointing towards dangerous situations in family life. An alcoholic husband with extra marital relations, history of criminal behaviour, irregularity at work place, quarrelsome nature, or mental illness is a thorn in the flesh for the other members, especially the wife. The rift between them widens by the day and unless someone makes a concerted effort to rectify the situation the problem may go out of hand. This is particularly true of the cases where husband-wife fights are frequent. The not-infrequent occurrences of the husband/wife conspiring with friends and relatives to get rid of the partner and other family members have to be placed in this context. It is not unusual that the potential victim would sense danger and find oneself helpless, as the distress signals would often go unheeded. This situation is particularly true in the cases of women with dowry related problems. These often lead to domestic violence, torture, homicide or to 'family suicide'.

Strengthening the family:

Sumesh and Raji represent young couples in Kerala living away from traditional neighbourhoods and close family households. They are also among the new generation bitten by the 'live better than the neighbour' syndrome. That such cases are increasing by the day should not be lost sight of. This is also to be seen as related to the fast paced social change taking place around us. But we should also remember that the pace of social change cannot be slowed down nor can the change process itself be reversed. The only step forward is to prepare the prospective husband and wife to build healthy and vibrant families. Given below is a 10-point agenda for young couples to follow, with the objective of building healthy families.

1. Treat each other as equals and be always supportive of each other.
2. Share the family chores and ensure that neither partner is forced to carry unbearable burden of household activities.
3. Spend as much time as possible in the company of the partner, and talk to each other as much as possible. Have nothing to hide from each other.
4. Listen to the other and facilitate ventilation of distress as and when needed.
5. Treat the other's friends and relatives with respect and affection. Allow your spouse the freedom to visit them, spend time with them, and give them gifts.
6. As far as possible do not take official matters home.
7. Treat your children with respect and concern. Learn to care for your children.
8. Be consistent in showing affection for the children, disciplining them, providing for their education, and socialization.
9. Spend in keeping with the means and be guided by what you require rather than by what the others possess.

10. Use television as a medium for entertainment, education and information.
In the use of this and other media, the likes and preferences of the others should be respected.

The above-mentioned are some possible measures to ensure that the family remains healthy and vibrant and the children feel wanted and cared for. It should always be remembered that the health of the family is directly proportionate to the efforts made and time spent rather than received as a gift of God, or accident of nature. But imaginative efforts and continuous monitoring will surely show results in the form of strong families and healthy children.

The family is to be considered the most effective safeguard against distress, pain and suicide. But not uncommonly, the family itself becomes a source of distress. The fast paced social changes taking place in the Kerala society, impacting on the family, have definitely contributed to this. The progressive disintegration of the joint family cannot be reversed. The only way is to prepare children to cope with the emerging social situation and build systems that would support the families going through stress. That this objective can be achieved with well-designed measures at the level of the individual, the family, and the neighbourhood is the only silver lining in an otherwise gloomy scenario.

-P.O.George, Social Development Consultant, Paranikulangara House,
Ollukkara, P.O., Thrissur district, Kerala. Telephone: 0487 2370295, E-mail:
po_george@hotmail.com