

The Arab Weekly

Suicide rate among Lebanese youth raises alarm

100 suicides were recorded in the first five months of this year, compared to 147 suicides in all of 2017.

Thursday 16/08/2018



Sally (L) and Serene listen to callers at Embrace, a suicide prevention helpline, in the Lebanese capital Beirut on July 13, 2018. (AFP)

BEIRUT - Frequent cases of suicide among young Lebanese, including more than four in recent weeks, raised public concern about mental health in a country that many associate with exacerbating social, financial and economic hardships.

Police data indicate that 100 suicides were recorded in the first five months of this year, compared to 147 suicides in all of 2017, 128 in 2016 and 138 in 2015.

“Based on these figures, there is a case of suicide every two-and-a-half days in Lebanon and a suicide attempt every six hours because, for every completed suicide,

we estimate that there are 20 failed attempts,” said Mia Atwi, clinical psychologist and co-founder of Embrace Association for Mental Health Awareness.

“In Lebanon, unlike other countries, we are a very small and tight community and when a suicide is committed the whole area would know about it. Suicide could be contagious. Once it is publicised it might affect vulnerable people and encourage them to take their own lives, too,” Atwi said.

While an increase of 30% in the number of suicide cases was registered from 2011-14, Lebanon’s suicide rate estimated by the World Health Organisation at 3.1% per every 100,000 people is low compared to global rates that can reach more than 15%.

Elie Karam, a psychiatrist and head of the Institute for Development, Research, Advocacy and Applied Care, questioned the accuracy of the official figures.

“Official figures show that we have one of the lowest suicide rates in the world but we have doubts about the accuracy of these numbers that are based only on cases that have been reported to police,” Karam said.

He said under-reporting is an issue in Lebanon and Arab countries where suicide and attempted suicide are considered shameful and sinful acts that are strongly prohibited by religion, both Islam and Christianity. “Due to those reasons and due to the social taboo and legal consequences associated with suicidal behaviour, cases of suicide and attempted suicide are thought to be frequently hidden by the victims and their families,” he said.

Karam stressed the need for “thorough monitoring over a certain period, not less than two years, to see if there is an increase in suicide rate that should be a cause for national alarm.”

Specialists said depression is the most common mental disorder leading to suicide in Lebanon, especially among young people who resort to substitutes, such as alcohol and drugs.

“Mental illness is caused by the interplay of different factors, social, psychological and biological and could be transmitted genetically,” Atwi said. “In Lebanon, 50% of suicide cases have biological reasons, whereas life difficulties which can be personal traumas or economic and financial hardships account for the other cases and they involve people who are already prone to develop mental illness.”

“Like any other disease, mental illness should be diagnosed and treated. If it is prolonged and left untreated it can lead to suicide on the long run,” she added.

Last October, Embrace introduced Lebanon’s first suicide prevention hotline number -- 1564 -- offering emotional support to callers as well as referrals to suitable treatment centres. Highly trained phone operators issue an evaluation of a caller’s likelihood of attempting suicide and connecting with their families.

“Our initial aim was to raise awareness about mental illness, which is still a stigma or taboo in our society but we found that there is a need in the community for a helpline to bridge a gap, especially for those who still think that going to a psychologist or a psychiatrist is a stigma and prefer to call a service which is anonymous and confidential,” Atwi said.

While people aged 15-29 have the highest risk of mental illness, Embrace Lifeline’s callers are ranging in age from 11-70 years. “We might get up to seven calls a day... We even get third-party callers. These are people who are worried about a relative or a friend and need advice on how they can help them,” she said.

“The helpline does not offer curative service. What we are doing is preventing the actual attempt. In one instance, we got a call from somebody who saw someone posting a goodbye message on Facebook. We managed to reach the family of this person and get them to be with him before he would harm himself,” Atwi added.

Mental health specialists said, in a post-war society like Lebanon the risk of subsequent suicidal behaviour could be bigger but the lack of services and the high cost of counselling further aggravate the problem.

Lebanon cannot afford not having sufficient treatment services accessible to all, especially since it’s not out of the woods. Otherwise, the vicious cycle will continue to produce more unhappiness, more mental diseases and more social instability.



Written By **Samar Kadi** Samar Kadi is the Arab Weekly society and travel section editor.