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עמותת ער"ן - עזרה ראשונה נפשית ד"ר שירי דניאלס - 28190					

Suicide alerts rise as lockdown fatigue sets in

Lee Yaron

A few days before the second lockdown began being lifted in mid-October, a message appeared on the screen at Eran, Israel's emotional first aid service.

"I attempted suicide a few minutes ago," it said. The writer, a man in his 40s, continued sending messages. "I've despaired of life," he wrote, noting that he felt "such a big failure" that "I can't even succeed in killing myself."

The operator supported him for reaching out while alerting police and first aid services. They found the man before another suicide attempt and he is being treated by social services.

During both lockdowns Eran volunteers received more than 70,000 calls, a total of 40,779 calls, more than 1,500 of them suicidal.

But the second lockdown saw the worst signs of mental distress, figures provided to Haaretz show. The Eran hotline says they were contacted by 837 people in

SUICIDE

Continued from page 1

October warning that they wanted to end their lives setting a record since the start of the pandemic in March. By comparison, in January and February 480 calls were received each month. In June 810 people called the hotline, but in July and August the calls were gradually reduced, reaching 607 in September.

During the first lockdown, 732 of the 40,779 calls to Eran were suicidal. In the second lockdown a significantly lower number of calls was made - 31,583 - but 837 were suicidal, marking a 49.5 percent increase of suicidal calls.

Dr. Shiri Daniels, Eran's professional director, says the apparent reduction in calls between the first lockdown and the second, compared to the increase in suicidal incidents is complicated.

"There was a record

number of calls in the first lockdown, 160 percent more than in the period before the lockdown. Then it decreased, but was still double the number of calls made in regular times. Then the number spiked again in the second lockdown to 140 percent compared to regular times," she says.

"In the first lockdown the emotional balance was disrupted, sources of support and comfort and significant activities were taken away. In March and April people were more occupied with the external threat than with their inner world, with survival. In the second lockdown, some experienced for the first time emotional stress with unprecedented force, also due to the economic and employment crisis, which generates an emotional crisis and affects a person's perception of their capability and belief to survive this period."

"In the second lockdown we saw more loneliness, more depression and more reports of acute mental distress. For groups at risk, loneliness is

more fatal than the virus. The hope that we're coming out of the situation turned out to be an illusion," she says.

One of the people who approached the service was a young woman with a diagnosed mental condition. She had been treated at a mental health center that had closed down and was having trouble "surviving on her own." She called for help, saying she was dreaming of seeing people, flowers and scenery. The walls were closing in on her and she was suffocating.

Another woman suffering from a mental disorder called after she had left home following a fight. She dialed from her car and threatened "to end it all." The operator asked her not to make any rash decisions. At the end of the conversation she agreed to drive to a psychiatric emergency room.

"Some callers are dealing with emotional distress in regular times as well, which worsened, while a considerable part are encountering for the first time intense distress they were not accus-

tomed to," she says.

"Some people coped successfully with the first wave, but after that their strength dwindled. It's like telling someone to hold their breath under water, and then telling them to continue for a little longer," she says.

The figures show that people who had wanted to take their own lives in the first lockdown had different reasons than those in the second lockdown. While in the first lockdown people called mainly due to fear and dread - of contracting the disease or transmitting it to others - in the second lockdown the calls were more about loneliness, acute emotional distress, family tensions and conflicts.

The rate of suicidal calls stemming from economic distress rose from four percent in the first lockdown to 15 percent in the second.

Calls stemming from loneliness and personal relations' issues increased from 26 percent in the first lockdown to 35 percent in the second. In both lockdowns 60 percent of the callers were women.