

I am pleased to welcome you to the Launch of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services' National Suicide Prevention Hotline, **800-COPE or 2673**.

Today, we gather to address the critical issue of mental health and to provide a lifeline of support to those in our society who are struggling. We acknowledge that despite decades of de-stigmatisation efforts, mental health, in general, and suicide in particular, remains a taboo topic, often met with silence and discomfort. Discussions about suicide are often uncomfortable, but the truth is the impact is far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate family and friends of the individual but also the wider community.

Suicide is incredibly complex and heart-breaking, often stemming from deep-rooted pain and suffering that may feel insurmountable. It is like a pebble thrown into a pond, causing waves far beyond the individual's final act.

The impact of suicide is not limited to the person who dies but resonates profoundly with those closest to them.

But before reaching that tragic point, an individual who decides to take his or her life may have endured significant trauma and overwhelming misery, feeling trapped in anguish. We must understand the depth of their struggle, and approach this topic with empathy and compassion by recognising their challenges.

Moreover, we must acknowledge that suicide extends to the people intimately connected to the individual. Family, friends, co-workers, and others, are left grappling with an immeasurable void. The pain and grief experienced by loved ones cannot be understated as they navigate the aftermath of such a devastating loss.

Ultimately, in the way that a pond is changed because of a pebble, an entire community can be changed by suicide.

A 2016 study in Kentucky which surveyed a group of 1,736 adults in the United States revealed that approximately 115 persons had been exposed to a single suicide, either by knowing someone who committed suicide or by witnessing it. The study further concluded that one in every five individuals reported that this experience had a devastating impact on their lives or caused a major disruption. Put simply, the impact of suicide exposure, has consequences that extend beyond the individual and into schools, workplaces, and communities.

Cognizant of this information, the Ministry recognises suicide as a national public health concern which requires urgent and immediate attention. A 2021 update from the World Health Organization revealed that globally, more than seven hundred thousand (700,000) persons lose their lives by suicide annually.

Further, it is also estimated that for each person who dies by suicide, more than 20 others attempted, thankfully, without success.

A March 2022 Loop TT article highlighted statistics from the Mental Health Unit of the Ministry of Health, which indicated an annual increase in the number of persons who died by suicide. Information provided by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) shows there were:

- 75 suicides in 2018
- 92 in 2019
- 104 in 2020
- 127 in 2021
- 142 in 2022
- and as of the end of March 2023, 21 suicides.

Disaggregated data from the TTPS show an alarming trend of suicide among our senior population:

- In 2018, 11 persons 60 years or older died by suicide
- In 2019, 13
- In 2020, 26
- In 2021, 16
- In 2022, 32
- And as of the end of March 2023, 6

Ladies and gentlemen this means we lost 561 lives to suicide in Trinidad and Tobago in just over a five-year period. Put another way, from January 1, 2018, to December 31, 2022, an average of 108 persons per year died by suicide within the last five years. The suicide rate was 10.92 per 100,000 population in 2022. These statistics, ladies and gentlemen, point increasingly to the need for additional and active prevention strategies. Your Government's National Suicide Hotline is one such response.

Coupled with the COVID-19-induced mental strain experienced by several families, the Ministry recognises the critical need to support those struggling with suicidal ideations or those bereaved by suicide-related circumstances. Several factors have been identified which contribute to suicide and suicidal thoughts, including persons experiencing some form of violence such as domestic abuse, bullying, child abuse and sexual assault, economic issues, failed relationships, family issues, substance abuse and the development of psychological disorders.

And while the social, psychological, cultural and other factors increase the risk of suicidal behaviour, the stigma attached to suicide means that many persons who require help do not seek the necessary support.

Several NGOs in Trinidad and Tobago are currently working alongside the Government to manage mental health issues to prevent suicide, and the Ministry takes this opportunity to applaud them for their dedication and commitment to this particular cause. More often than not, though, these NGOs work independently of each other, and they face several critical challenges that affect their overall impact. This has resulted in a gap in the social response mechanism to effectively deal with the issue of suicide and crisis issues in general.

There is no disputing the efficacy of crisis hotlines as an effective strategy to assist persons in distress in a way which is easily accessible and immediate. Suicide hotlines, such as **800-COPE (2673)**, are valuable in connecting distressed persons with vital services and continue to provide critical support.

Over two million calls were answered by the United States of America's National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in 2018 alone. The Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services Center hotline in Los Angeles saw an 8,000% spike in calls during COVID-related lockdowns and restrictions in 2020. And since its commencement in November 2022, the Ministry's Hotline, 800-COPE, has received 59 calls within one month. Remarkably, this level of engagement occurred despite limited prior advertising, making today's official launch even more significant. And while to some, this number may appear modest, the significance of each life saved through this Hotline cannot be overstated. Through the courageous act of reaching out, lives are transformed, and the trajectory of untold pain is altered.



The Hotline serves as a lifeline that pulls individuals from the depths of their darkest moments, providing solace, understanding, and the opportunity for healing. Ladies and gentlemen, we at the Ministry believe that behind every saved life lies a story of redemption, resilience, and the triumph of the human spirit. It is a testament to the power of compassion and support, reminding us there is a way forward, even in despair. The evidence, both locally and internationally, suggests that digital interventions such as hotlines are increasingly being seen as one way in which effective treatments for self-harm and suicidal thoughts may be improved.

The Ministry considers the launch of this 24-Hour Crisis hotline to be timely and hopes that it will efficiently address crisis issues related to suicidal ideations and other critical issues faced by our citizens. The Hotline falls within the remit of the Ministry's National Family Services Division (NFSD) and would be operated by specially trained personnel.

Furthermore, as part of the Whole of Government, Whole of Society approach, collaboration with several stakeholders would be upheld through a referral system. These include the Ministry of Health, the Family Court, the Children's Authority, the Trinidad and Tobago Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago, Non-Governmental Organisations, Community-Based Organisations and Faith Based Organisations. All must be involved; those who seek support from the scientific community should find help there, while those who prefer a faith-based approach must also have access to suitable assistance. Confining this matter to our hospitals or conventional practices is no longer acceptable or sufficient.

By the same token, ladies and gentlemen, while our stakeholders and partners have a part to play, I wish to state that there is an equally important role for family and community. As an evolving society, our communities must create spaces for open dialogue, counselling support and other support groups to bolster preventative strategies. At the same time, we must consider what is in place to support those impacted by suicide.

In this regard, there is room for training and empowerment for everyone within our communities. I would like to encourage the National Family Services Division to examine how our communities could be more supportive of their various interventions.

With the commissioning of this Hotline, we anticipate that **800-COPE** would save lives and allow access to counselling services online and on the phone to a more significant number of persons.

This new Hotline would also facilitate data collection regarding the number of persons who attempt suicide and those who experience suicidal thoughts, as well as family crisis issues. This would allow for gaps to be filled and relevant interventions and strategies to be identified.

The monitoring and evaluation component of the Hotline also envisage that data would inform policy development and other initiatives. Ladies and gentlemen, this Hotline also forms part of the Government's overall psychosocial intervention called *Spotlight Initiative*. It is confidential and free to the public, with a minimum wait time to speak to an Active Listener.

The triennial theme for World Suicide Prevention Day 2021-2023, "**Creating Hope through Action**", serves as a reminder that there is an alternative to suicide and encourages us all to take action by imparting messages of hope. In this regard, in addition to contacting the Hotline,

I wish to remind everyone that other strategies can be utilised to provide support.

As a society, I encourage us to take greater personal and individual responsibility to help prevent suicide wherever they occur. Today, as part of the Ministry's own commitment to preventing suicide in our society, I wish to announce that the National Family Services Division will soon be rolling out a National Suicide Awareness and Prevention programme as part of the service offerings under the Ministry.

Like the Parenting Programme, the Division will design training modules to be rolled out to the national community in the coming months. In this way, the Government will continue to play an active role in suicide prevention through sensitisation and support at the community level.

Therefore, I want to throw out the challenge to all in attendance or those listening and watching online: **If you think someone is at immediate risk of self-harm or hurting another person - reach out to a trusted friend, family member, or healthcare professional; remove any harmful or other items that may potentially cause harm, and listen without judging, arguing, threatening or yelling. In so doing, you may serve to preserve their life.**

I also urge you to stop by the various information booths and learn all you can about how we can work to prevent suicide.

I also invite members of the media to partner with us as we campaign to inform and educate the public about the warning signs and preventative measures to bring hope to those in distress.

Each life saved represents a renewed chance at happiness, dreams fulfilled, and the precious moments shared with

loved ones that might have otherwise been shattered. Together, let us celebrate these interventions as a testament to our collective commitment to saving lives and preventing the profound pain that suicide leaves in its wake.

It is our collective responsibility to foster a supportive environment where open discussions about mental health and suicide can take place. I wish to reiterate the Ministry's commitment to providing support to families throughout Trinidad and Tobago, empowering them to lead productive and healthy lives, and leaving no one behind.

According to Barack Obama, former President of the US, “to anyone out there who’s hurting, it’s not a sign of weakness to ask for help, it’s a sign of strength.”

Let us work hand in hand to promote mental well-being and create a society that values and cherishes every life.

I thank you, and may God bless you!

