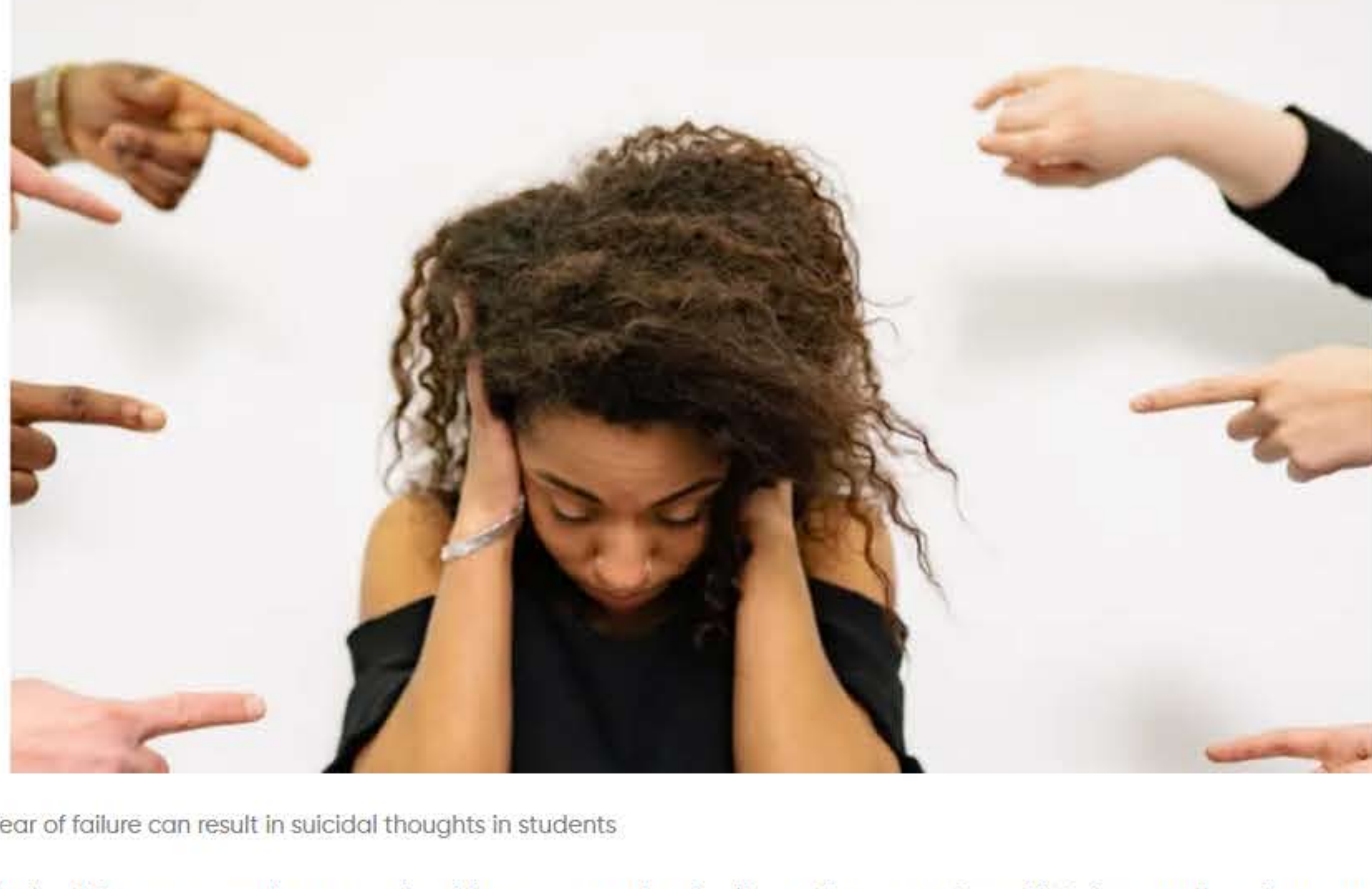


EXCLUSIVE: Experts on what causes suicidal thoughts in students

by Musba Hashmi | Updated on Sep 17, 2021 03:06 PM IST | 55.6K



Fear of failure can result in suicidal thoughts in students

A tired face, eyes that speak of hunger, and a feeling of uncertainty. This is usually what one expects from a child returning home after giving an exam. Would you, even in your wildest dreams, think of a child battling suicidal thoughts right after the exam and succumbing to it? The answer might be a big no.

While this might sound like a typical scene freshly brewed out of a Bollywood movie to you, however, it is as real as it can be. When Sunday woke up to more than 15 lakh students appearing for NEET 2021, it was a usual day until the news of a 19-year-old committing suicide due to the fear of failing the exam in Tamil Nadu surfaced on the Internet. Many were taken aback, and parents specifically, drowned in a pool of worry.

The horror continued as two more students, both aged 17, from the State ended their lives the following days for the reasons suspected to be the same.

These young deaths, out of fear of failing the exams, show how miserably we have failed our students. What may come as a tight slap is the fact that we just finished up celebrating World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10.

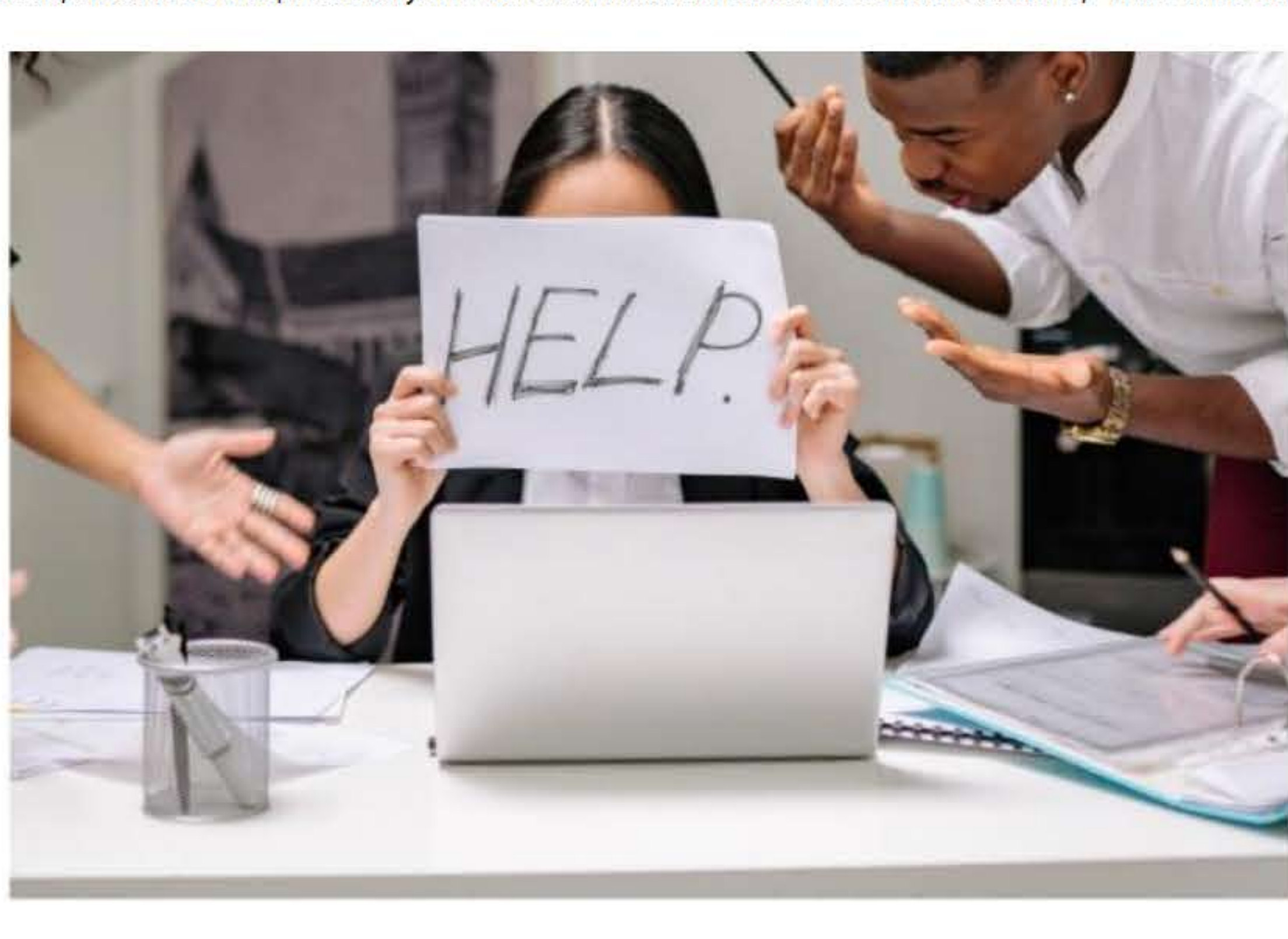
Dr. Malini Saba, Founder & Chairman, Saba Group and a psychologist, tells you that the root cause of students or anyone taking such a drastic step is fear. "The fear of appearing for an exam, the fear of not doing well, the fear of maybe not clearing it. The preconceived notions of not being able enough to prove their academic prowess often push the young and tender minds of these students to give up before reaching the finish line. These tell-tale signs are unfortunately not at the surface which makes it almost invisible to those who do understand the pressure of the stigma attached to being a 'failure'. These are often the ones who apply that pressure," says Saba.



In order to escape from the tag of a 'loser', students sometimes try approaching their elders with their fears and when not addressed in the right way, i.e, with care, patience, and assurance, they choose to escape the situation altogether by ending their said lives. Suicide, in such situations, is the only way out for such students, she adds.

Pulkit Sharma, a clinical psychologist, agrees with Saba and says that it is the fear of failure that haunts students so much that they don't hesitate in giving up on their lives.

"Education, in simple words, tends to be a way of teaching our children how to live a life, how to survive in the Man VS Man world, and how to lead a happy, content, logical and practical life. The question is why such a simple school of thought has turned so complex? And if it has been, does it not require everyone to look inside ourselves to find an answer?," asks Sharma.



He adds that the race to get good marks and the pressure of outdoing others slowly get to the heads of students. "This pressure, if not controlled at the right time, turns deadly. The urge to get the perfect score proves no less than an addiction, which will find ways to satisfy itself and when unable to do so, giving up on life seems an easier option," opines Sharma.

The situation not only calls to rethink our education system but also reduces the burden of expectations. "It is high-time that we understand that we can't continue to keep on pressurizing students with our expectations. Not everyone is good at everything. No one teacher can master all the subjects, then how can we expect the same from students? Schools, colleges and competitive exams aim to teach and test; however, the purpose has now shrunk to just secure the top seat. This trend has to change," says Sharma.

Ritam Khare, Advocate-on-Record, Supreme Court of India, tells you that abetment to suicide is a criminal offence under Section 306 IPC and the instigator is the offender. "However, in such cases it becomes difficult to fix the responsibility on somebody. With that being said, every suicide is a failure of the State, i.e. the State Government. Specifically talking about the Tamil Nadu issue, they have a valid argument when they say that there is a disparity in the aids and facilities of aspirants living in the remote areas and the cities. The Government needs to fix this disparity, as well as the pressure put and the endurance level of the student," opines Khare.

A Class XII student, who has been going through the dilemma of juggling studies and the pandemic, says that "at times it becomes difficult to cope with the stress and this may result in suicidal thoughts. "There are times when we just don't understand how to sail through. Things seem tough, we have to focus on our Boards, and at the same time decide a career option and prepare for competitive exams. How can one handle all this at once? Though I have never felt suicidal, there were times when I started questioning the whole system and purpose of life. Are we here just to keep chasing things in life and fulfil the expectations of others?" he asks.



Adding to this, he says, is the pressure of the relatives who never call you to ask how you are doing, but will definitely call on the day of the results or to ask which stream/career option one is opting for. "And God forbid, if you are choosing an unconventional career option your parents will be forced to believe that they should be stopping you from pursuing your dream. Because why not? Old is gold," he says.

Rati Khurana, Head Psychologist at Listenerz, says that if parents, teachers, and caregivers are able to identify students with suicidal tendencies, a lot of innocent lives will be saved. "Sudden social withdrawal is a big red flag that should never be ignored. People with the intent of suicide might start giving away their most loved personal belongings, if somebody you know has been doing this, talk to him/her. They may also start mentioning things that indicate their suicidal intent like, "How would it feel if somebody jumps from the 10th floor?" or even making jokes about suicide and self-harm like, "It wouldn't even matter to you if I wasn't alive the next day." Such people may also start behaving in a reckless manner and have conversations about how they have become a burden on people. Add to it, sudden mutism or excessive calmness is also a big warning sign that should never be ignored," mentions Khurana.



Among all the criticism that the exams are receiving, Kartika Sharma, a former professor, and an author feels that rather than criticizing the exams, we should be enabling students to become more and more mentally strong and take up the exams in a light-hearted but determined manner.

"Dejection and what the parents are going to say are the main causes of suicides. So, parents should act as counsellors to their children and help them overcome the obstacles. One should focus on the concern of the students without accusing them of failure. In this manner, suicides can be prevented to a large extent. Students should be given the motivation that they are able to shun the fear with confidence," says Kartika.

The solution to this lies in understanding that failing to clear NEET or any other goal is not the end of the road nor does it bring 'shame' to the family. "Spreading awareness against suicide and not considering it as the last resort will help millions of children and adults around the world to understand that they are not at the end of the rope. There are suicide survivors, helplines, and professionals who are ready to help those in these dark spaces. Suicide is not an option. Ask for help, offer help, and never consider shame to be a part of the decision-making process," explains Saba.

She adds that like any Tumblr post, even she would say that failure is a part of life. In such situations, students who don't even know if they will fail, knowing that if a situation comes in, it is okay to fall and stand back up. "Fearing the future is not going to help either. It is important to prepare to the best of their abilities and have confidence in themselves, knowing that they gave their best shot. It also helps to have an open mind that embraces the idea of second chances and in many cases, helps to options as well. If not a doctor, then maybe some other profession which you are passionate about," adds Saba.

Disclaimer: If you know someone who is having suicidal thoughts or is suffering from a serious mental illness, reach out to a nearby doctor, mental health expert, or an NGO for immediate help.

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