

The Sikkim State Legal Services Authority (SSLSA) under the directions of Hon'ble Mrs. Justice Meenakshi Madan Rai, Judge, High Court of Sikkim and Executive Chairperson, Sikkim State Legal Services Authority organized a ***Training Programme for Teachers identified as Counselors to address Mental Health Issues of students and to provide Counselling to them and their Parents*** on ***29<sup>th</sup> July, 2023 (Saturday)*** at Chintan Bhawan, Gangtok, under the aegis of National Legal Services Authority and under NALSA (Legal Services to the Mentally Ill and Mentally Disabled Persons) Scheme, 2015.

This was in pursuance to a meeting organized by Sikkim SLSA with the Psychiatrists and Clinical Psychologists of the State on 18.04.2023 chaired by the Hon'ble Executive Chairperson of Sikkim SLSA where it was noticed that barring two schools in Gangtok, the other schools in Sikkim do not provide in-house Counsellors. Therefore, to safeguard the mental health of students and to meet the immediate requirements, two teachers (one male and one female) from 210 Government Secondary and Senior Secondary Schools across the State were identified for training as in-house Counsellors.

The Resource Persons at the training were Dr. C.L. Pradhan, Consultant Psychiatrist and Ms. Nancy Palmu Chankapa, Senior Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychiatry, Health & Family Welfare Department. The first phase of the training was accordingly conducted to enable the teachers to identify mental health issues of students and provide counselling to not only the students but also their guardians and parents which could mitigate the alarming rate of suicide amongst students.

The Hon'ble Executive Chairperson during her inaugural address informed the participants of the need to recognize mental health issues and put an end to stigmatization that surrounds mental illness. Her Ladyship emphasized on the alarming rate of suicides in Sikkim and the steps taken by the Hon'ble High Court of Sikkim in a suo moto PIL based on a newspaper article that reported the matter of suicides. It was stressed by her Ladyship that Sikkim SLSA has imparted training to the Counsellors manning the suicide helpline number on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2023 and that the teachers need to generate awareness amongst the students on the services rendered by the helpline number "1800 3453225 & 03592-202111" which can help mitigate the increasing rate of suicide amongst students.

Consultant Psychiatrist, Department of Psychiatry, Dr. C.L. Pradhan, deliberated on the topic "*Psychological problems and solutions in adolescents*", describing adolescence as second growth life stage and discussed transition age, age of platform and all the developments including physical, social, mental and sexual. He also deliberated on the various types of mental illness and its symptoms. It was stressed that the teachers need to know about these illnesses to enable them to identify and ensure timely treatment to the students. He further informed that young brains can be shaped in any form and early counselling and treatment are imperative to prevent mental illness from scathing the brain further. The impact of alcohol and drug abuse on a person's mental health was also disseminated and the reasons for Opiate Substitution Therapy was explained as also its availability at hospitals in Gangtok, Singtam and Namchi. On the aspect of suicide, by citing life experiences, he urged the teachers to identify students who may be contemplating suicide and

requested that they be immediately referred to the hospital for expert therapy and counselling.

Senior Clinical Psychologist, Ms. Nancy Palmu Chankapa addressed the gathering on the topic “*Psychological Counselling and Stress Management*” and deliberated on the methods of counselling and rapport building with the students to assist teachers garner their trust for effective counselling. The importance of stress management by inculcating habits of meditation, exercise, relaxation, recharging by sleeping well, prioritizing tasks, eating well and connecting socially were elucidated and the signs of stress, namely, tension, irritability, inability to concentrate, feeling excessively tired, trouble in sleeping, increased blood pressure, etc were also delved upon.

The programme was followed by a vibrant interactive session and queries raised by the participants were duly addressed by the Resource Persons.