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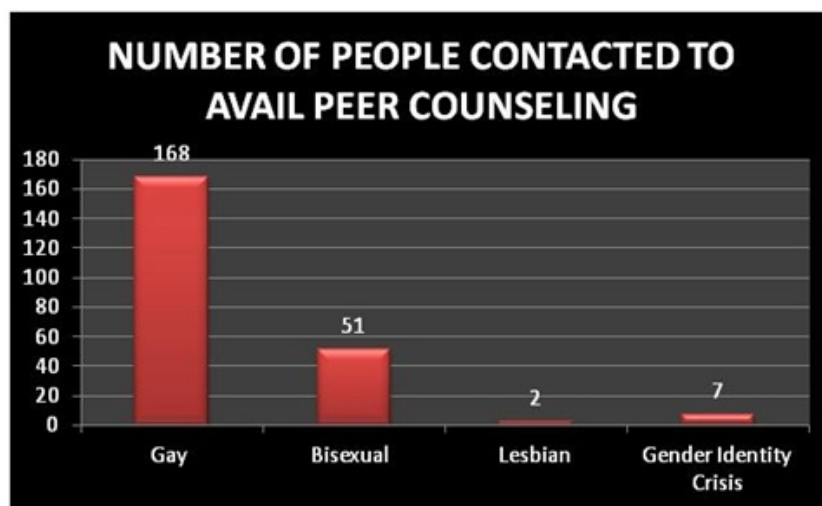
Chennai Dost – LGBT Peer Counseling Report (April 2013 – March 2014)

Posted on April 19, 2014 by admin — 4 Comments ↓

Chennai Dost commenced free Peer Counseling Service for Gay, Bisexual men and women from 18th August 2012 on weekends from 12:00 PM to 6:00 PM from. Ajay Sathyan, co founder of Chennai Dost who handles the peer counseling, was trained and certified along with nine other LGBT peers by East West Center for Counseling (CFC) an initiative organized by Shakthi Center with funding from LLH Norway. Counseling was specifically offered to clients who were 20 years and above considering the Indian context and the urgency for a professional when dealing with the younger demography. Seven individuals who were 18 and 19 called for counseling and they were referred to a counselor who is sensitive about LGBT issues and who also counsels children.

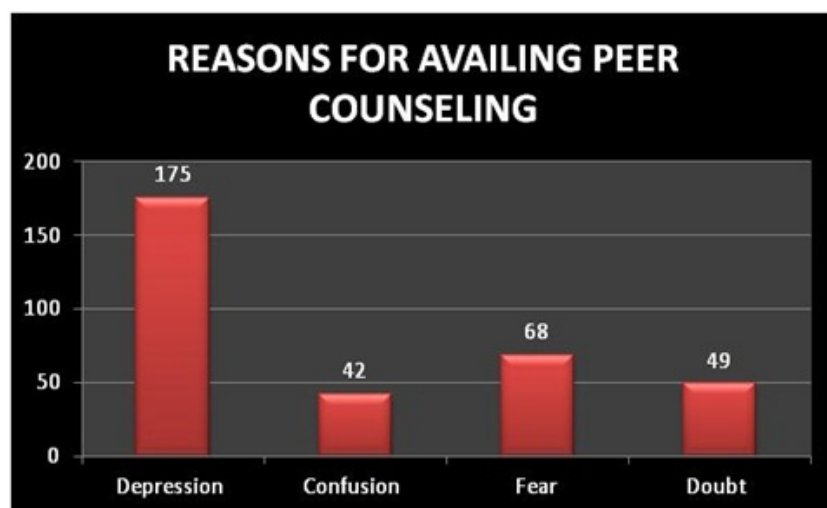
Due to unavailability of space, one-on- one counseling was stopped from July 2013 and counseling was offered over the phone on appointment during weekends. Around 523 individuals contacted Chennai Dost for counseling in one year and only 228 individuals were able to avail the service. Lack of funds and unavailability of space were important factors that hindered the service. Clients at times were unable to keep up appointments and due to unsatisfactory appointment schedules; many clients were unable to avail our counseling service. Apart from the above reasons re-criminalization of IPC 377 contributed to the drop of clients. The clients who called about IPC 377 mentioned they feared that how IPC 377 can be used against them.

The following data will help us understand why peer counseling is essential for the LGBT community. It will help us understand the issues the community face which leads them to take drastic measures and opt for options that are more than detrimental.

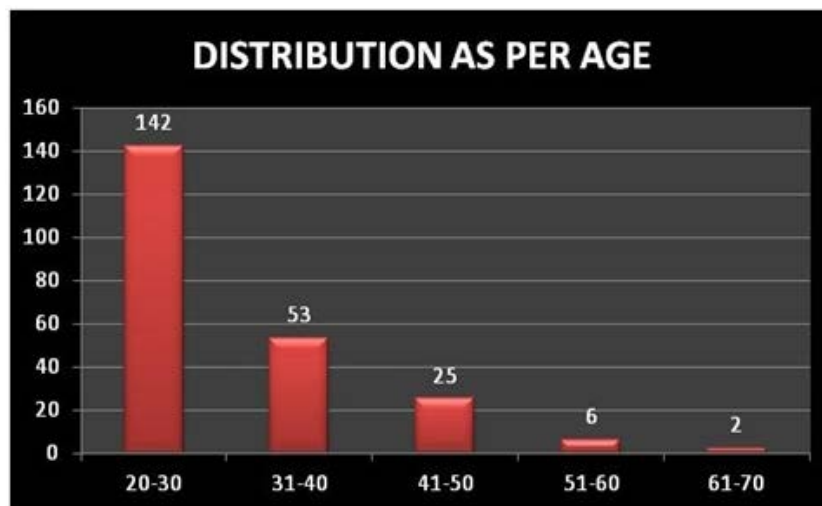


523 individuals contacted us in the last year over the phone and email to avail counseling. Lack of funds hindered us from reaching 295 individuals and we were able to reach only 228. Among the 228 who availed counseling, 162 were gay men, 51 were bisexual men, 2 were gay women and 7 were facing gender identity crisis. The presence of gay and bisexual women is very less due to the fear of violence and harassment as perpetrators assume these women to be promiscuous. In general women face a lot of violence and harassment and being bisexual or gay add fuel to the flame and many women tend to remain closeted and avoid platforms created for them to interact and socialize.

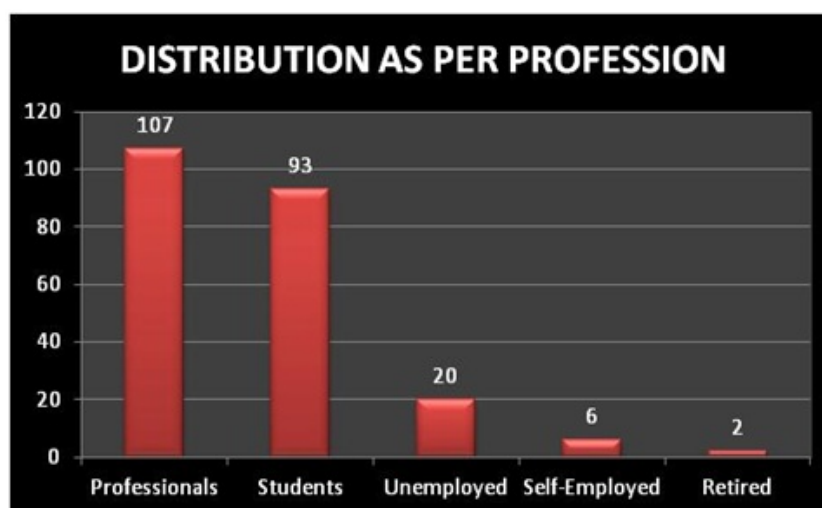
The counseling appointments were from 12:00 PM to 6:00 PM on weekends till July 2013 and due to unavailability of space, one-on-one counseling was stopped and counseling was offered over the phone on appointment during weekends. This service is offered for free by Chennai Dost to the clients; the counseling service is not a funded programme. With regular funding it will be possible for us to reach a larger population in need of psychological support.



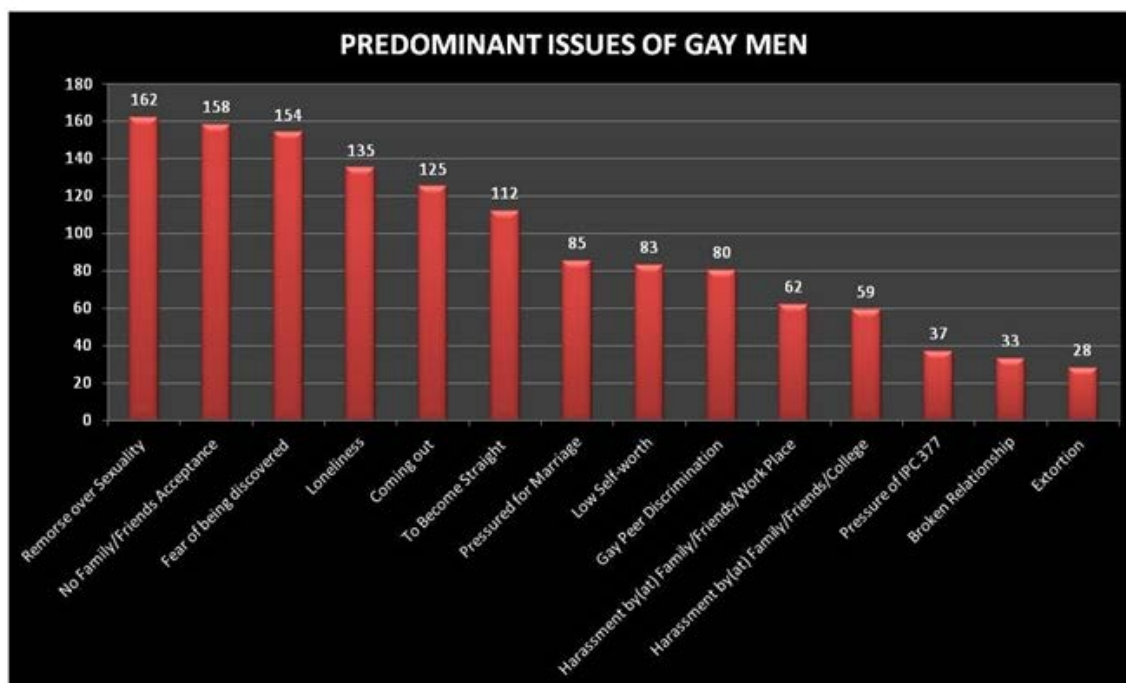
Around 223 individuals availed peer counseling as they were depressed, afraid, in doubt and confused. 175 called in saying that they were depressed. Most of them mentioned that they are depressed due to factors relating to their sexual identity. Issues like coming out, family acceptance, societal acceptance, forced outing and fear of the future were the occurring topics that clients brought. 68 individuals called expressing fear; fear about their future and being discovered and facing ridicule, shame, harassment and incarceration as India criminalizes any non-reproductive/non-penile vaginal sex. 42 individuals called in that they are confused, a small percentage of individuals were confused about their gender and gender expression and some were confused about their same sex attraction. 49 called in with doubts, doubts like how IPC 377 may affect them, if there are treatments to turn straight, reduce feminine behavior etc.



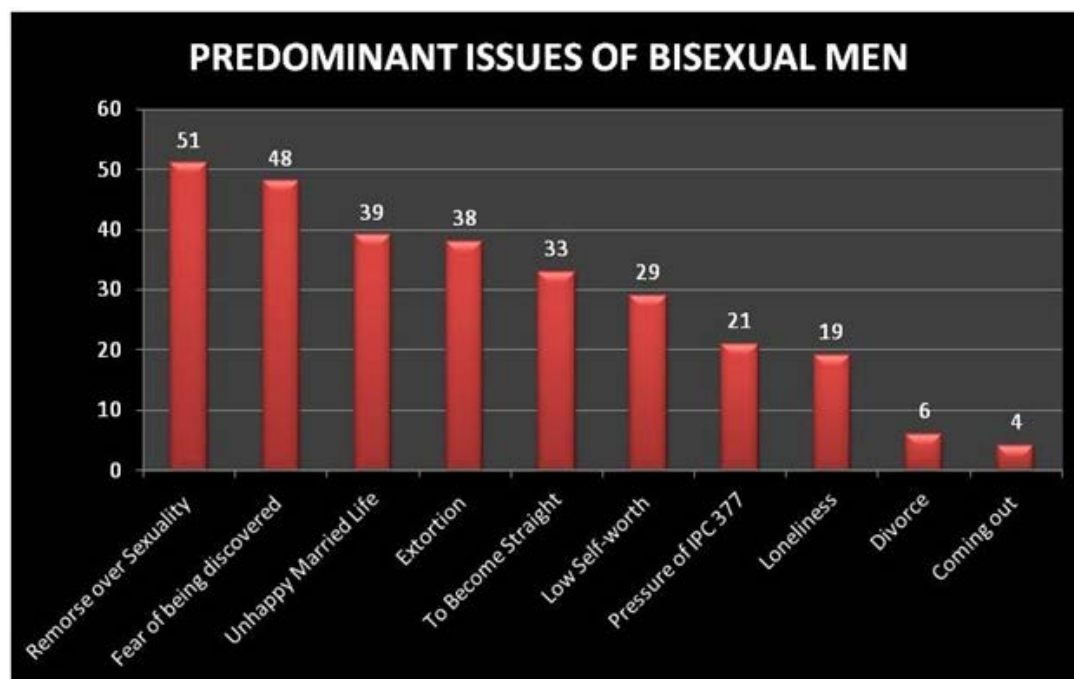
The predominant age groups that contacted for peer counseling were age groups 20-30 (142 individuals) and 31-40 (53 individuals). The age group 20-30 was comparatively more when it came to avail counseling. It can be understood that the younger generation is technically more savvy compared to their seniors. Many middle aged LGBT might also require immediate help and they can be reached and sensitized about the availability of peer counseling through conventional media.



107 employed individuals with staple jobs and 93 students contacted for counseling. Their concerns range from depression to indulging in risky behavior. The unemployed individuals who called mentioned that they lost their employment due to workplace harassment by colleagues/supervisors over their identity.

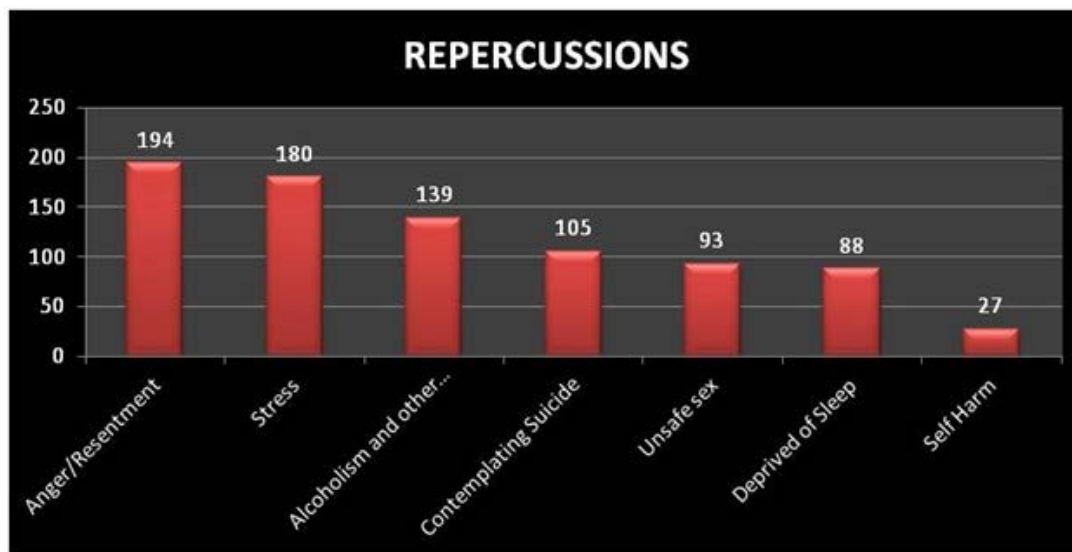


162 individuals said that they regret being gay. Societal pressure, harassment, discrimination and non-acceptance of LGBT contributes to all the remorse that they carry. 158 individuals said that they are depressed as they wonder will their family accept, approve and support their lifestyle. They wish they did not live a double life. 154 individuals expressed fear of being discovered, this is due to the recent laws and the outburst of violence and society's perception of the LGBT community. The community fears that if they are discovered, they might be ostracized by their family, lose their friends, may face harassment at work and/or lose their job and recognition in society. 135 individuals said they were lonely because societal and family pressure forces them to be closeted. 125 individuals called to ask if it was necessary to come out, they were worried about the repercussions of coming out. 112 individuals wished they were straight and requested for medication and/or treatments to reverse their same sex attraction. 85 individuals said they are being forced to get married; these were predominantly individuals who were in their late 20's and early 30's. These individuals said that they are afraid to come out and some mentioned that in spite of coming out they are being pressured to get married. They mentioned that their family and extended family members insist that a marriage will fix the issue. 83 individuals contacted saying that they feel worthless, because society and people around them constantly make them feel worthless by speaking ill about homosexuality. They feel that there is no hope for LGBT folks and they are convinced that being born LGBT is shameful and disgraceful. 80 individuals mentioned that gay peer discrimination is one among the issues they are facing, since most of them have absolutely no support and acceptance from family, friends, colleagues and society in general; they look up to their peers and sadly there is discrimination, lack of understating and lack of empathy with in the community to support one another. They said that their peers compare their issues with one another and make it a competition to gain sympathy, thus harassing and discriminating one another in the process instead of being empathetic and supporting each other. 62 professionals and 59 students called in that they are harassed by/at family, friends, workplace and/or college. Some of them were taken to doctors and psychiatrists and were on heavy medication. A couple of them were institutionalized and some of them were taken to quacks, fakirs and to priests to be exorcised. Almost all of them who called in about harassment were verbally and physically abused by their family. These individuals also faced harassment and discrimination at workplace that forces them to constantly change companies. Few of them have remained unemployed due to inconsistency in work experience. Most of them who called in about work place harassment were individuals who worked in corporate companies. Some of the corporate companies who have non-discriminatory policies do not use these policies against the perpetrators due to the lack of sensitivity and most companies do not have policies in place and orient employees about alternative sexualities and identities even though they claim themselves to be a fortune 500 multinational companies.

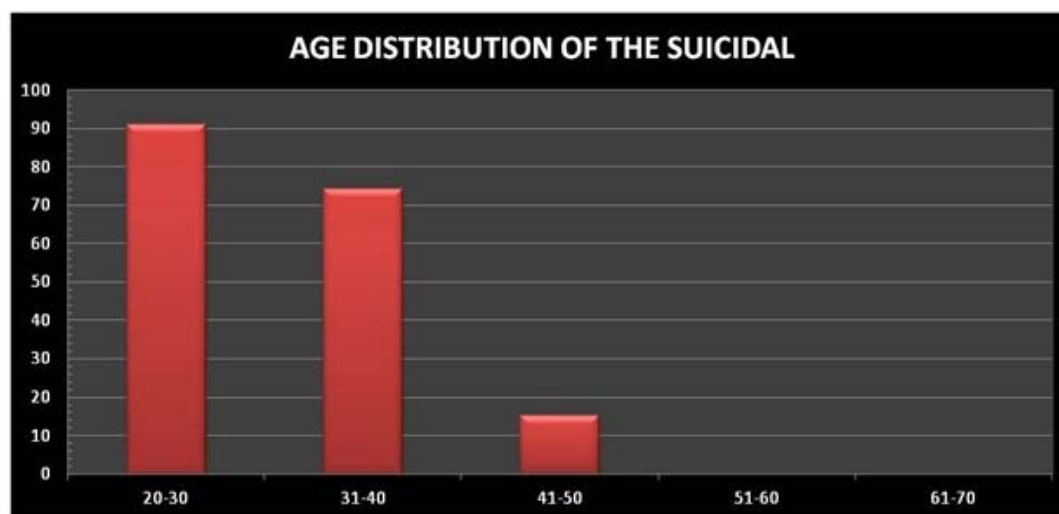


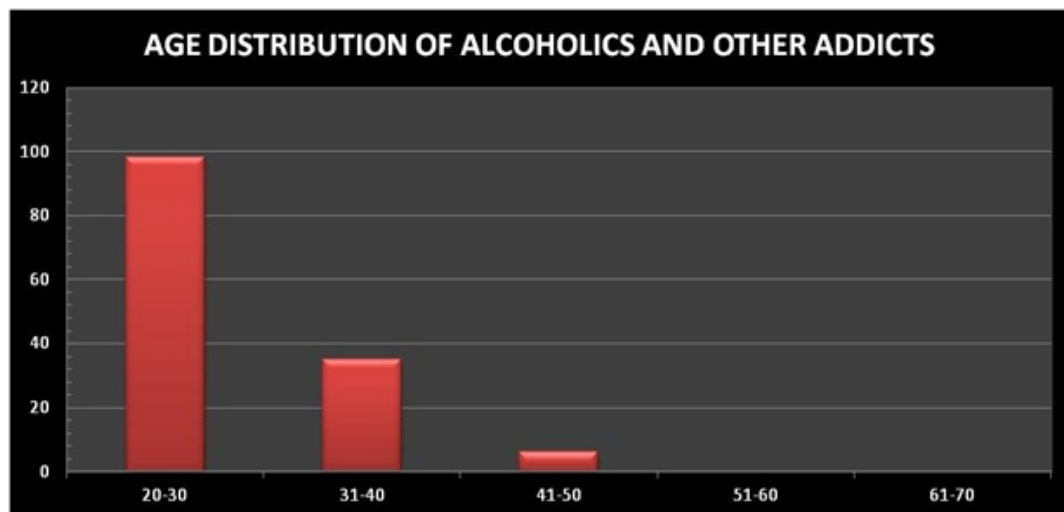
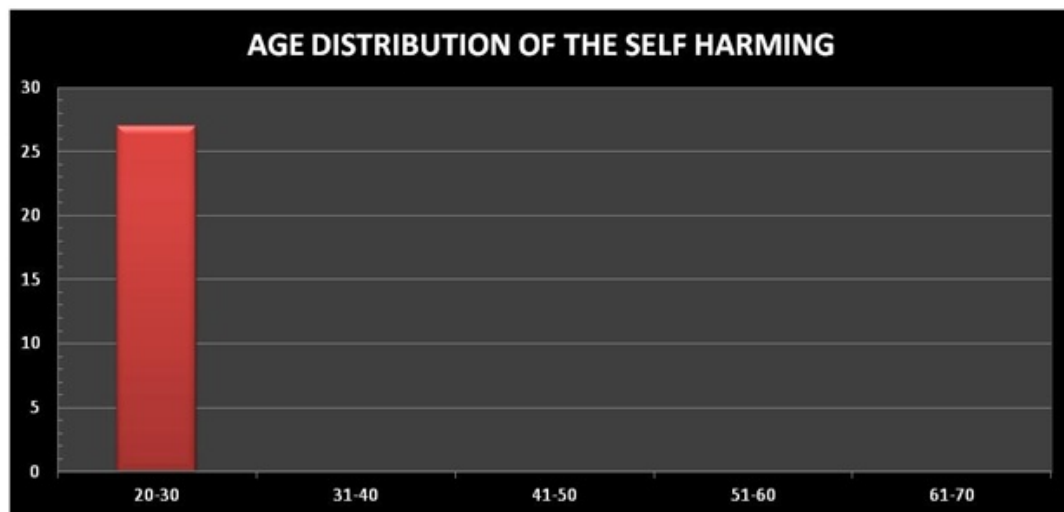
51 individuals expressed remorse over their sexuality and wished that they were straight as it was hard for them to control their sexual desires towards two genders. They feel it is shameful that they are bisexuals. 39 individuals said that they were in an unhappy marriage as some of them were forced into it and some chose to get married fearing societal and family pressure and now realize that it was a mistake to get married. 48 individuals fear that their family, friends, colleagues and/or classmates will find out that they are bisexual. They fear that upon discovering the truth about them their life would be ruined and they will be alone. Around 38 individuals feared about extortion. 29 individuals mentioned that they feel worthless and 33 wished to be straight. Society's lack of understanding, lack of LGBT supportive laws and support systems contributes to self stigma, unnecessary stress and other psychological issues. 19 individuals mentioned loneliness as an issue as bisexual men have limited space or platform to discuss about their desires and attraction for men. 6 individuals mentioned that they were going through a bad divorce, 4 mentioned that their wives and their family after discovering about their sexuality have dragged to court to humiliate them and extort money. They also mentioned that this caused them to be suicidal.

Around 66 gay and bisexual men called in fearing blackmail and extortion. Of the 66, 23 have been victims of extortion and availed counseling to talk about the horrors of extortion. Apart from these 23 men many were/are extorted by extorters who identify closeted victims, lure and exploit their vulnerability. When asked about pressing charges against them, they were reluctant to go down that road, as there are possibilities of being exposed to their families and facing police harassment and ridicule.



Around 105 have been contemplating suicide or have tried to kill themselves. The reasons were forced outing, family and friends' harassment, loneliness and extortion. 194 mentioned that they have anger and resentment and 180 individuals said that they are stressed leading a dual lifestyle. They way they perceive life is extremely negative. They mentioned they are not happy with the life that they are leading. Out of depression and loneliness 93 mentioned that they indulge unsafe sex, thus making them vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. 88 individuals mentioned that they are deprived of sleep suffering from insomnia. Stress related to their sexuality has contributed to their sleep depravity. 139 individuals said they drink profusely and/or abuse substance regularly. These individuals also under the influence indulge in unsafe sex. 27 individuals mentioned that they are into self harming practices like cutting themselves, strangling themselves, abusing substance etc.





From the above three charts we can see that the younger crowd seems to be comparatively more vulnerable and resort harmful practices as a vent out. The younger crowd is more suicidal. We can assume that comparatively their seniors may also indulge in harmful practices. We were not able to capture that as not many contacted us. If this programme was funded, we would be able to reach a lot of people who are in need of this service.

Conclusion

From the above data the significance and the necessity of peer counseling can be understood. There are reasons that are very grounded, real and painful that the community face; horrifying and sad circumstances that push them to be suicidal, to be addicts, to be stressed, to be depressed and hurt themselves voluntarily. Peer counseling in one way this community can be reached and helped. Through this year's report we are able to understand that physiologically and psychologically the community is extremely vulnerable and at risk. They go through immense stress and depression which affects them emotionally and mentally forcing them to be suicidal, abuse substance and practice unsafe sex. Most targeted interventions and counseling is offered to MSM (Men who have sex with men) below the poverty line, but the majority of LGBT are from the middle and the lower middle class who are oblivious of any such services, they should be at least a platform or a forum for them to be educated about sex, sexuality, their rights and offer support. Chennai Dost is a self funded group trying its best to reach out to this invisible community hoping to help and make a visible difference when there is enough resource.

Report Prepared by
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