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Issues Within the Sri Lankan Tamil Community During the Covid Pandemic in England and How These Challenges Were and Continue to be Met.

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Abstract

The operation of the 24-hour Tamil Helpline and groups that sprung up during the Covid pandemic within the Sri Lankan Tamil community in England, have played a vital role in maintaining the wellbeing of this community. These initiatives were set up in response to concerns expressed and an apparent need from within the community. In this connection, information sharing, education and mutual support has played an important role towards understanding and taking responsibility for the individual, familial and community's wellbeing.

The success of these initiatives can also be attributed to the community as a whole responding to the crisis and the associated benefits of knowing support was available from trusted professional members from within their community. It appears that strengthening social connections and undertaking health enhancing activities, particularly exercise and maintaining a daily routine was helpful. Regular zoom sessions relating to exercise and information sharing were available in the Tamil language, these were well attended by people from across the UK in addition to a number of other countries.

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Keywords

Tamils, Covid-19, Wellbeing, Community, Helpline, Mental Health.

Mental health professionals use the term trauma to describe difficult events that may overwhelm our usual ways of coping. In collective trauma there is a challenge to the lifestyle, values and identity of a whole society (Herman, 2015). When the Covid pandemic struck the Sri Lankan Tamils living in England, reported feeling overwhelmed and many might be deemed vulnerable. This vulnerability arose from:

- 1) **Language difficulties** - this led to difficulties in accessing health services, employment and other statutory provisions. In particular, the majority of them were not fluent enough in English to describe their symptoms over the telephone (as face-to-face consultations with a doctor were generally not available).
- 2) **Stigma** - Among the Tamil diaspora, emotional and mental issues are seen as a sign of weakness. Males in particular are expected to be strong and resilient and carry on regardless - it is considered a sign of weakness if they discuss their feelings.
- 3) **Domestic abuse** - Tamil cultural norms meant "For generations, women have learnt to bear and accept violence against them. The community blames the women for the violence as being due to their inability to look after their husbands properly." (Somasundasram et al, 2005). Within the Sri Lankan Tamil community, women will often accept physical violence and abuse from their male partners sometimes without complaint. If the women did raise any concerns about their treatment with others within the community, it might be dismissed. They might be blamed by some members of the community for bringing the abuse upon themselves or they would be told "he loves you, that's why he attacks you". This can lead to abuse being under reported and explains why women will often suffer in silence. Although work is going on to educate and inform people that domestic abuse and the use of violence is never acceptable.
- 4) **Suicidal thoughts** - These thoughts are also seen as a sign of weakness and as a result, those who harbour them do not often

divulge them as they feel ashamed and do not expect any sympathy or support.

- 5) **Parenting difficulties** - Parents face first and second generational difficulties bringing up children in a different culture e.g. issues concerning physical punishment, sexual orientation, arranged marriages, leaving home and developing their own identity.

All of which are viewed differently in the two cultures.

Soon after the lockdown came into effect in March 2020, it became evident that many Sri Lankan Tamils were struggling to cope and this was exacerbated by the afore mentioned factors.

Several cases of suicide and familicide (when a family member kills several family members over a short period of time) were reported, and a group from the Tamil diaspora consisting of lawyers, accountants, general practitioners, psychiatrists, social workers and volunteers from the community, got together to consider how to address these problems.

Legal and financial issues relating to employment (loss and part time employment) and benefit claims also needed to be addressed. During this period, general health issues as well as mental and emotional health problems, slowly began to surface.

A 24-hour telephone help line for Sri Lankan Tamils was set up. The calls were triaged by volunteers who were fluent both in Tamil and English, who would then refer callers to the appropriate professionals either within the Tamil diaspora or within the wider British society. They in turn were able to provide advice and support and would signpost callers to the relevant local and national organisations if required. Many were also supported by interpreters and translators where necessary, as many of the callers struggled to communicate in English over the phone. This human service response to the Covid crisis was much needed and appreciated. People were worried about food, mortgages, job stability and schooling for their children amongst many other issues,

Within five months of its inception in March 2020, the Tamil Helpline, had dealt with almost 1,500 calls. Furthermore, as the Covid crisis continued and restrictions on going out and meeting people freely were enforced (and working from home became the norm) many Tamil people

felt isolated in their homes. Family relationships were also severely strained. Domestic abuse and alcohol and drug abuse appeared to increase with all its negative consequences.

Organisation of the Tamil Help Line

The Tamil help line organising group met every four weeks to discuss the activities and the main operations of the Helpline, and it was decided that an Awareness programme relating to psychological wellbeing needed to be drawn up.

This was largely due to an increase in the community's understanding of the problems faced during the Covid outbreak, especially in respect of emotional health issues where people could come forward and seek help at an early stage without apparent fear or shame, despite long standing cultural taboos and stigma relating to mental health.

Twelve mental health awareness sessions were held by the organising committee or invited group members and guest speakers from July 2020 to October 2020, these took place virtually, so that people could participate from their homes. . People participated from a range of countries as detailed in table 1.

The topics covered were as follows:

- 1) Resilience
- 2) Tolerating distress
- 3) Opening our minds
- 4) Family Wellbeing/Relationships
- 5) Exploring our mental strength
- 6) Alcohol and the mind
- 7) Children and Adolescent mental health
- 8) Post-traumatic stress disorder
- 9) Exploring your potential and embracing your values
- 10 Can we prevent suicide?
- 11) Let's protect our children
- 12) What is psychosis?

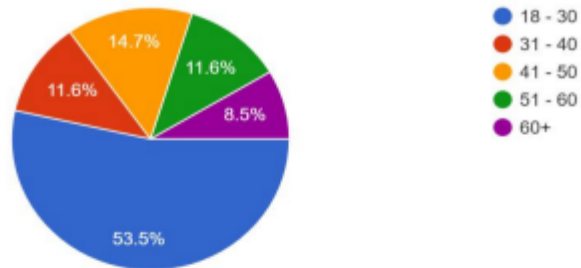
Table 1; Biographical details and feedback information relating to the participants in the training



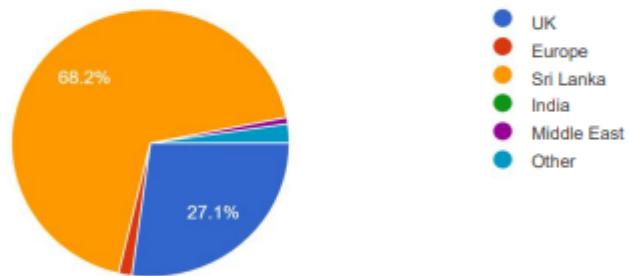
Feedback

Training Sessions: 1 - 12 (From 18th July 2020 to 03rd Oct 2020)

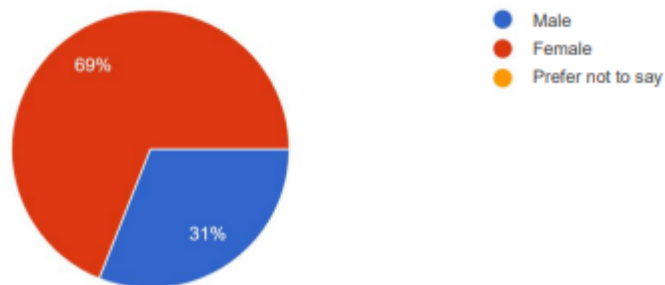
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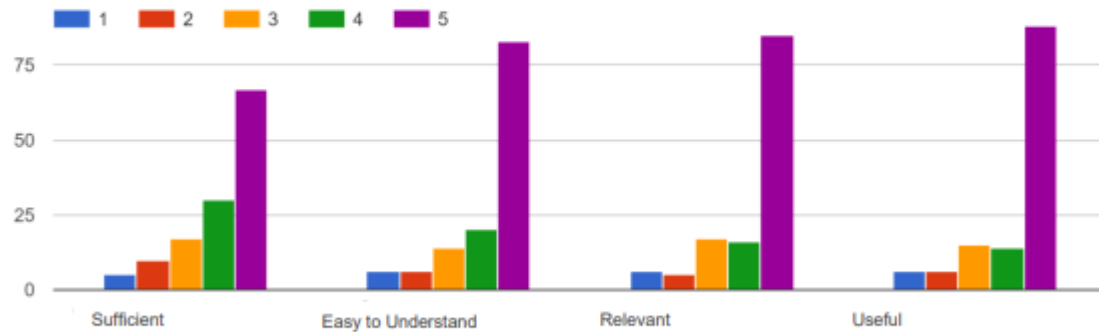
Country



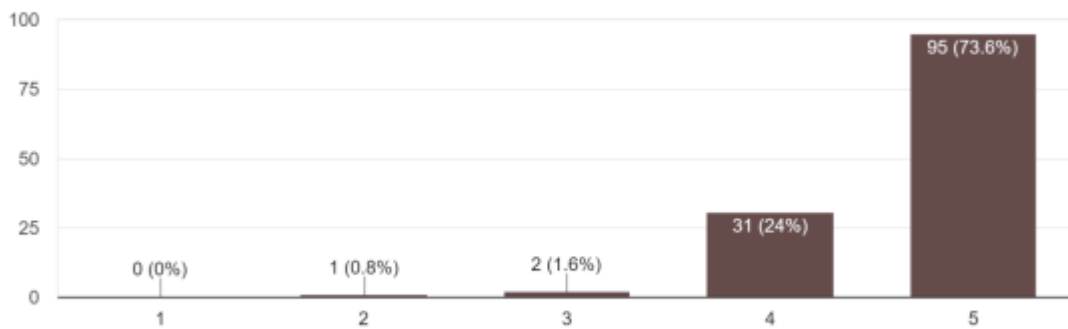
Gender



Information Given



Satisfaction



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Table 2: Ratings from the participants following the 12-week training

These sessions were all well attended and open to all Sri Lankan Tamils, not only in the UK but in other countries as well. Many of them had taken refuge in countries all across the world to escape the ethnic conflict in their homeland.

Significantly and interestingly (as can be seen on the graphs above), most of the online sessions were attended by Sri Lankans living in Sri Lanka, as Sri Lanka was badly affected by the Covid epidemic. Another reason put forward for this, was that mental health professionals in Sri

Lanka were few (WHO atlas, 2017) noted there were only 7.14 mental health professionals per 100,000 people. The importance of developing partnerships and considering the local context and cultural factors as essential organising concepts in any piece of work around mental health and in building capacity was noted by Tribe, Weerasinghe & Parmaswaran, (2014).

Following the success of the awareness programme, the Tamil Helpline identified other areas to boost and motivate the Sri Lankan Tamil Community. These included Tamil knowledge and information forums being started, where sessions focussed not only on general health issues, but also on financial and social/domestic issues (which were all relevant to the Tamil diaspora). This also included, but were not limited to issues pertaining to immigration, housing and domestic and alcohol abuse. These began at the end of 2020/beginning of 2021 and are still ongoing. Recently a course on IT fundamentals was conducted which was extremely popular, as most channels for help were being offered through new social platforms such as zoom, skype etc.

The Tamil Helpline also ran sessions on Yoga and womens' fitness programmes. It has been observed that children along with their parents often partake in these sessions thereby possibly improving bonding within the family. These provided a routine to the day and overcame isolation and allowed participants to make social contacts with likeminded people. These sessions continue on a regular basis and are free of charge.

The Tamil Helpline was the brainchild of Dr. A. Puvinathan, a General Practitioner who has and continues to work extensively to promote the welfare of the Sri Lankan Tamils living in the U.K and in Sri Lanka. (www.tamilshelpline.org) It is to be noted there have been other groups formed to address the challenges within the Sri Lankan Community during this pandemic.

An example is the Elders Empowerment Programme/Centre for Community Development in Kingston, Surrey. The National Lottery have graciously granted funds to organise these activities so that older adults have something to look forward to each day. These include exercise classes such as yoga, Tai Chi and dance. In addition, as covid restrictions eased, social walks outside in the open air along with trips to places of interest such as to temples and to the seaside were arranged.

In conclusion, "it may be more meaningful to look at how the community as a whole has responded, how the community coped, and what can we do at the community level." (Somasundasram & Sivayokan, (2005).

Community action around common purpose is healing for all of us. The "real" antidepressants are financial security, human connection and having a sense of value and purpose (Somasundaram, & Sivayokan, 2005 p, 81)

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Notes

The Tamil Help Line staff are as follows:

Executive Director: Dr A Puvinathan

Finance Director Mr A Arnold

Technical Director Mr V Logathas.