Mental health helplines in India: Bridging the treatment gap through telepsychiatry and community-based crisis support

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Dear Editor,

Mental disorders constitute a major public health challenge in India, affecting nearly one in seven individuals and contributing substantially to years lived with disability and premature mortality (India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Mental Disorders, 2020; Patel et al., 2018). Despite increasing awareness and legislative reforms, the treatment gap for mental disorders remains alarmingly high, estimated to range between 70% and 92% for various psychiatric conditions (Patel et al., 2018). Limited mental health infrastructure, a shortage of mental health professionals, stigma, and geographic inequities continue to impede timely access to care.

Telepsychiatry and crisis helplines have emerged as pragmatic and scalable approaches to address these barriers. India has a long history of community-based mental health innovations. The MANAS trial demonstrated that evidence-based interventions for common mental disorders could be effectively integrated into primary care settings through task-sharing approaches (Chatterjee et al., 2008). Similarly, the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF) established one of the earliest community telepsychiatry models in India, highlighting the feasibility of extending psychiatric services to underserved populations through telecommunication technologies (Tharoor & Thara, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the adoption of tele-mental health services and underscored the necessity of evidence-based guidelines for telepsychiatry and crisis intervention (Singh & Sagar, 2022). Recognizing the growing burden of mental disorders and the unmet need for accessible mental healthcare, the Government of India launched the National Tele Mental Health Program in October 2022. Tele-MANAS (Tele-Mental Health Assistance and Networking Across States) was subsequently established as a free, round-the-clock national service providing psychological first aid, counseling, and referral pathways. The development of digital mental health ecosystems, including the e-MANAS framework, further demonstrates India's commitment to integrating technology into mental healthcare delivery (Math et al., 2021).

In parallel, numerous non-governmental and community-led helplines have strengthened India's tele-mental health ecosystem. Services such as AASRA, Sneha Foundation, Vandrevala Foundation, iCALL, and initiatives such as Speak2Us in Tamil Nadu provide suicide prevention, emotional support, and psychosocial counseling. These helplines offer several advantages: anonymity, accessibility, affordability, and the ability to reach individuals who may otherwise avoid conventional psychiatric services because of stigma or confidentiality concerns.

The increasing demand for helpline services also reflects changing societal attitudes toward mental health. Young adults and students constitute a substantial proportion of help-seekers, presenting with anxiety, depressive symptoms, relationship difficulties, academic stress, and suicidal ideation. Consequently, mental health helplines should not be viewed merely as crisis-response mechanisms but rather as integral components of a stepped-care mental health system.

Nevertheless, several challenges remain. The rapidly increasing demand for telecounseling services may exceed available human resources, potentially leading to delayed responses and variability in service quality. Continuity of care after crisis intervention remains another major concern, particularly in regions with limited psychiatric infrastructure. Furthermore, the lack of standardized quality indicators and outcome measures makes it difficult to systematically evaluate helpline effectiveness (Singh & Sagar, 2022).

Future efforts should focus on strengthening referral networks, developing national quality standards for telecounseling, expanding training and supervision for volunteers, and integrating helplines with primary and specialist mental healthcare services. The incorporation of digital innovations, including artificial intelligence-assisted triaging and multilingual platforms, may further improve accessibility and efficiency while preserving the empathy that remains central to crisis intervention.

India's expanding network of mental health helplines represents an important opportunity to reduce inequities in access to psychological support. India currently hosts a diverse network of government-led, non-governmental, and community-based mental health helplines that provide crisis intervention, suicide prevention, and psychosocial support services across the country **(Table 1).** Continued investment, rigorous evaluation, and sustainable policy support are essential to ensure that tele-mental health services evolve into a resilient and effective pillar of mental healthcare delivery.

Table 1. Major Mental Health Helplines in India: Categories, Availability, and Linguistic Accessibility

Organization	Category	Helpline Number	Availability (Days and Time)	Languages	Website
Tele-MANAS	Government	14416; 1800-891-4416	24 h, 7 days/ week	English and 20+ Indian languages	https://telemanas.mohfw.gov.in
KIRAN Mental Health Rehabilitation Helpline	Government	1800-599-0019	24 h, 7 days/ week	Multiple Indian languages	https://depwd.gov.in
Vandrevala Foundation	NGO	99996 66555	24 h, 7 days/ week	English, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Odia, Marathi, Tulu	https://www.vandrevalafoundation.com
MPower Minds	NGO	1800-120-820050	24 h, 7 days/ week	English, Hindi, Marathi	https://mpowerminds.com
AASRA	NGO	022-27546669	24 h, 7 days/ week	English, Hindi	https://www.aasra.info
Jeevan Aastha	NGO	1800-233-3330	24 h, 7 days/ week	English, Hindi	https://www.jeevanaastha.com
Fortis Mental Health Helpline	Private/ Corporate	+91-8376804102	24 h, 7 days/ week	Assamese, Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Konkani, Marathi, Malayalam, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Rajasthani, Achiku	https://www.fortishealthcare.com
1Life Suicide Prevention & Crisis Support	NGO	7893078930	Daily, 05:00–24:00	Hindi, English, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Marathi, Punjabi, Sindhi, Bhojpuri, Bengali	https://1life.org.in
Voice That Cares	NGO	8448-8448-45	Daily, 09:00–21:00	English, Hindi, Telugu	https://www.rocf.org/voice-that-cares
Mann Talks	NGO	+91-8686139139	Daily, 09:00–20:00	Hindi, English, Marathi, Gujarati	https://www.manntalks.org
iCALL (TISS)	Academic institution	022-25521111; 9152987821	Monday–Saturday, 10:00–20:00	Marathi, Bengali, Telugu, Hindi, English	https://icallhelpline.org
Muktaa Helpline	NGO	788-788-9882; 080-69267931	Monday–Saturday, 12:00–20:00	English, Hindi, Marathi	https://mcf.org.in/mental-health
Parivarthan Counselling Centre	NGO	+91-7676602602	Monday–Friday, 13:00–22:00	Most Indian languages, except Telugu and Malayalam	https://parivarthan.org
HEAL Foundation	NGO	+91-8108172432	Monday–Friday, 14:00–21:00	Hindi, English, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Gujarati, Marathi	https://www.healfoundation.co.in
Arpita Foundation	NGO	+91-80-23655557; +91-80-23656667	Daily, 07:00–21:00	English, Hindi, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Konkani, Assamese, Gujarati, Bengali	https://www.arpitafoundation.org
Sneha Foundation	NGO	044-24640050	24 h, 7 days/ week	Tamil, English	https://www.snehaindia.org
Speak2Us	NGO	+91-9375493754	Daily, 09:00–18:00	Tamil, English	https://msctrust.org
Connecting Trust	NGO	+91-9922001122; +91-9922004305	Daily, 12:00–20:00	English, Hindi, Marathi	https://connectingngo.org
Roshni Trust	NGO	+91-8142020033; +91-8142020044	Daily, 11:00–21:00	Telugu, Hindi, English	https://roshinitrust.com
Lifeline	NGO	+91-9163940404; +91-9088030303	Daily, 10:00–22:00	Bengali, Hindi, English	N/A (Email: lifelineKolkata@gmail.com)
Sangath	NGO	011-41198666	Daily, 10:00–18:00	English, Hindi, Marathi, Konkani	https://sangath.in
COOJ Mental Health Foundation	NGO	+91-6361612525	Monday–Friday, 13:00–19:00	English	https://cooj.co.in
Sumaitri	NGO	011-23389090; +91-9315767849	Daily, 12:30–17:00	Hindi, English	https://www.sumaitri.net
Ankahee Helpline	NGO	+91-8655486966	Daily, 16:00–22:00	English, Hindi, Marathi	http://www.ankaheehelpline.org

TISS, Tata Institute of Social Sciences; Tele-MANAS, Tele-Mental Health Assistance and Networking Across States; N/A, not available; NGO, Non-governmental organization.

Mental health helplines currently operating in India are categorized according to organizational type and highlight their availability, linguistic diversity, and web accessibility. The table illustrates the breadth of India's evolving tele-mental health ecosystem, encompassing government-led, non-governmental, academic, private, and community-based initiatives providing crisis intervention, suicide prevention, and psychosocial support services.

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