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# *Taking on the menacing* **BLUE WHALE CHALLENGE**

**The deadly online Blue Whale Challenge, which targets and goads teenage children to self-harm, mutilation and finally suicide, has created a wave of panic among the parents community in India. Given the psychological vulnerability of teens, counsellors advise parents to encourage two-way communication, monitor children's Internet usage, and quickly address signs of teen depression and self-destructive behaviour**

ARUNDATHI NATH

**T**he Blue Whale Challenge (BWC) — an innocuous sounding but deadly online game which targets and goads teenage children to self-harm, mutilation and finally suicide — has created a wave of panic among the parents community in India. Over the past six months, at least six cases of teen suicides linked to BWC have been reported from Panchkula, Mumbai, Kolkata and Thiruvananthapuram. Worldwide, an estimated 130 cases of teen suicides have been attributed to this sinister online game even as its designer, Russian Philipp Budeikin, was arrested in May.

Most recently on September 22, Karan Thakur (17), a student of DAV School, Sector 8, Chandigarh, hanged himself to death after playing the game. Police investigations revealed that 11 students in Chandigarh and Panchkula were participating in the challenge. Media reports indicate several instances of teens, who had reached advanced stages of BWC, being prevented from taking the final fatal step by alert teachers, parents and/or police. BWC involves completing a series of tasks — such as slashing parts of your body, watching a horror movie, killing an animal, carving the outline of a whale on one's forearm,

etc — assigned to players by administrators over a 50-day period, with the final challenge daring players to commit suicide.

The spate of BWC-linked teen suicides has prompted the Union government to issue a directive on August 11 to Internet majors such as Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Microsoft to remove all links to the Blue Whale Challenge from their websites. In September, a judge of the Madras high court bench in Madurai, announced that he had been contacted by the vice consul of Russia in south India offering Russia's help to control spread of the Blue Whale Challenge. The court was hearing a *suo motu* public interest litigation (PIL) initiated by it after a Madurai-based college student fell prey to the game in August.

Based on the reality that blue whales beach themselves on land as a form of suicide, the game was created by 22-year-old Russian Philipp Budeiki, who admitted that his objective was to goad players into suicide. He started off in 2013 by establishing contact with multiple teenagers on the Internet, studying their mental health, and then selecting those he found weak or depressed who could be tormented into killing themselves.





### TEENS PRIME TARGET

Teenagers are the prime targets of BWC and similar online games because they are the most vulnerable to mental disturbances. For millions of youth around the world, the teen years are a prolonged period of emotional turmoil, highs and lows, and years of intense physical, psychological and emotional upheaval. Unsurprisingly, during these years of turbulence, teens are susceptible to peer and academic pressure and are often unable to cope with stress, resulting in widespread anxiety and depression. Now with children and particularly teens, having easy access to the Internet and digital devices such as smartphones and tablets — according to *Unicef Child Online Protection in India Report 2016*, 134 million children countrywide have access to mobile phones and the Internet — they have become easy targets of cyber bullying and abuse. A 2015 global YouGuv survey claims that one in five teenagers have been tormented by cyber bullying.

“Pre-teens and teenagers are especially vulnerable to online abuse and bullying as they are at a stage in life when surging hormones trigger numerous psychological, social, cognitive and emotional changes. Many teens who don’t have supportive home and school environments are easily goaded into indulging in self-destructive behaviour as a panacea for overwhelming emotions, such as melancholia, anger, self-loathing and shame. They often get addicted to self-harm as a coping mechanism and are unable to stop,”

### THE BLUE WHALE CHALLENGE BASICS

- BWC is an online game designed by 22-year-old Russian Philipp Budeiki, who has admitted that his objective was to intentionally manipulate and drive its players to suicide.
- The challenge is not merely a game, it creates an online community whose members are required to complete a set of tasks.
- Pressure to complete the challenge is exerted by a constantly changing group of people.
- Once an individual signs up for the challenge, they are asked to accept a ‘cookie’ that becomes embedded in the victim’s computer. The cookie is designed to draw all information of the computer. Using this information, the curator blackmails the victim, saying that if a particular task is not completed, their private photos or information will be made public, or that one or both their parents will be killed.
- The first tasks are simple, such as waking up at unearthly hours or watching horror movies. The tasks become progressively more difficult such as carving a blue whale design on one’s body, and sending a photo as proof. The final challenge is to commit suicide.
- The Blue Whale Challenge is also known as ‘Wake Me Up at 2:40 a.m’, ‘A Silent House,’ or ‘A Sea of Whales’.



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BLUE WHALE

**Pink Whale.** A new initiative dubbed the Pink Whale or *Baleia Rosa*, whose objective is to disseminate love and happiness, has sprung up as a response to the deadly Blue Whale Challenge. Baleia Rosa originated in Brazil in April and the game already has more than 300,000 followers on Facebook and 45,000 on Instagram. As in the Blue Whale Challenge (BWC), this Brazilian game, available on Android and iOS devices, presents 50 challenges to its players. But unlike BWC, which is all about self-harm and suicide, its pink version attempts to promote positivity with feel-good tasks



such as 'write on someone's skin with a marker how much you love them', 'apologise or forgive someone', 'unblock a friend from your social media accounts'.

**Smart Blue Whale.** Elsewhere, a Pakistani teen has developed an app to take on the Blue Whale Challenge. Waseem Gul's app takes the premise of the challenge and turns it on its head. Like the original challenge, the 18-year-old's game involves a series of 50 tasks, but instead of being dangerous and destructive, they are fun, goofy, and productive. Some of the game's assignments include 'do ten push ups', 'eat a donut but don't lick your fingers/lips afterwards' and 'help your parents with a household chore'. After you finish your 50th task, you get a message that you have become a Smart Blue Whale.

**Rise Up Game.** A software firm in Mangalore is working on developing the Rise Up Game, an app with 30 positive challenges, including visiting an orphanage and sending a video lauding the Indian army.

says **Loya Agarwala**, Guwahati-based adolescence counsellor and author of *A School Counsellor's Diary* (2013).

**DANGER SIGNS**

**Depression.** Worldwide, teenage depression is rising. According to a 2016 study published in the journal *Paediatrics*, depression in teens has increased from 8.7 percent in 2005 to 11.5 percent in 2014. According to Agarwala, teens who have experienced at least two weeks of low mood characterised by loss of self-esteem, disinterest in everyday activities, disturbed sleep patterns and difficulty in concentrating, are the most susceptible to depression.

**Self-harm.** As the 'success' of the Blue Whale Challenge in finding ready victims has proved, teens are most susceptible to self-destructive behaviour. In fact, self-mutilation — the act of cutting one's own body parts with a razor or other sharp objects — is most reported in teenagers. A global study conducted in 2016 by the US-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, and published in the highly-reputed UK-based *Lancet*, found that self-harm was the major cause of 60,000 deaths annually in India in the age group of 15-24 years. The study, which was based on data collected in 2013, also shows that there's been a marked increase in self-destructive behaviour among teens



over the past two decades, signalling a rise in stress, mental disorders, changing lifestyles and behavioural patterns among youth. Moreover a World Health Organisation 2015 study reports that India tops the global suicide rate in the 15-29 age group — the population that is most active online.

Signs of self-harm can be physical or emotional. Some of the physical signs include cuts, bruises, burns, bald patches from pulling out hair etc. Emotional signs are depression, tearfulness, low motivation, withdrawal and isolation, sudden weight loss or gain, low self-esteem and self-blame, alcohol consumption, drug abuse etc.

**HOW PARENTS CAN HELP**

Given the psychological vulnerability of teens to online bullying and sinister games such as the Blue Whale Challenge, psychologists and counsellors advise parents to encourage two-way communication, monitor children's Internet usage and online activities, and immediately address any signs of teen depression and self-destructive behaviour through counselling.

According to **Dr. Anjali Chhabria**, a well-known psychiatrist and founder of Mind Temple, a counselling centre in Mumbai, young people are forced to seek refuge online when there's breakdown of communication between parents and children, and when parents ignore warning signs of teenage depression. "During the teen years it's imperative for parents to take special care to communicate as well as closely observe and monitor their children's behaviour.



## BATTLING TEENAGE DEPRESSION

Parenting coach **Kavita Yadav** and psychologist **Loya Agarwala** offer parents some useful advice on helping teenagers fight depression:

- Encourage open, two-way communication, replete with words of encouragement and advice.
- Provide emotional support which involves understanding, compassion, support and acceptance.
- Give teens the freedom to pursue their goals and ambitions without burdening them with high expectations.
- Build trust by being non-judgmental so that it is possible to have heart-to-heart conversations.
- Give them respect and independence to boost their self-confidence.
- Have family discussions about social trends, online abuse, etc with your teens so that you can understand their perspectives better.
- Arrange one-on-one counselling sessions with a school counsellor or psychologist.
- Explore therapies such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), Narrative Therapy and Solution Focused Brief Therapy which are useful for dealing with teenage depression.



In fact, a teen who indulges in risky and dangerous behaviour is already grappling with some undiagnosed mental health illness. More than 90 percent of people who resort to the final solution of suicide have at least one or more treatable mental illness such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia. Alcohol and drug abuse are also the precursors of suicidal behaviour,” says Chhabria.

Parenting coach and founder-director of Gurgaon-based JiNa — Living Positively, **Kavita Yadav**, who has experience of working with troubled teens, says it is vitally important for parents to immediately address any signs of depression in children through counselling. “Not all teens who suffer depression or self-harm come from dysfunctional families. Parents need to be vigilant about their teens’ activities and behaviour without invading their privacy, and signs of depression and self-destructive behaviour must be addressed immediately through counselling,” says Yadav.

According to Yadav, it’s also important for parents to set time limits for Internet usage and educate children about the dangers of cyber bullying, online abuse and game such as the Blue Whale Challenge. “Snatching a youngster’s phone away is not the solution as it leaves the underlying unhappiness and alienation unresolved. Explain the dangers of BWC to children rather than sweep-

ing the issue under the carpet. If you find that your child is suddenly withdrawn, losing sleep or appetite, open and non-threatening communication is the answer. Also encourage them to take up creative and skilful hobbies including art, dance, music or sports,” she advises.

### THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

Apart from parents, school and college managements also have an important role to play. Since news of rising teen suicides linked to the Blue Whale Challenge has broken, schools across the country have been devising ways and means to deal with this disturbing phenomenon. For instance, the Samsidh Mount Litera Zee School, Bangalore, recently organised a lecture for high school students to educate them about the dangers of BWC and other online games. “We called in a cyber expert to speak on BWC and online abuse. Later, we spoke to them about other experiences that could enrich their lives. Moreover we have introduced a project where every child has to perform an act of kindness every day, such as expressing gratitude to one person daily and writing three good things that happened to them every day. We believe these activities will help them develop compassion and kindness. It’s also the responsibility of schools to develop children not just academically but also emotionally,” says **Veni Sukumar**, head of education of the group’s four schools, which also conduct sessions on ‘mindful parenting’ for its parents body.



Kavita Yadav