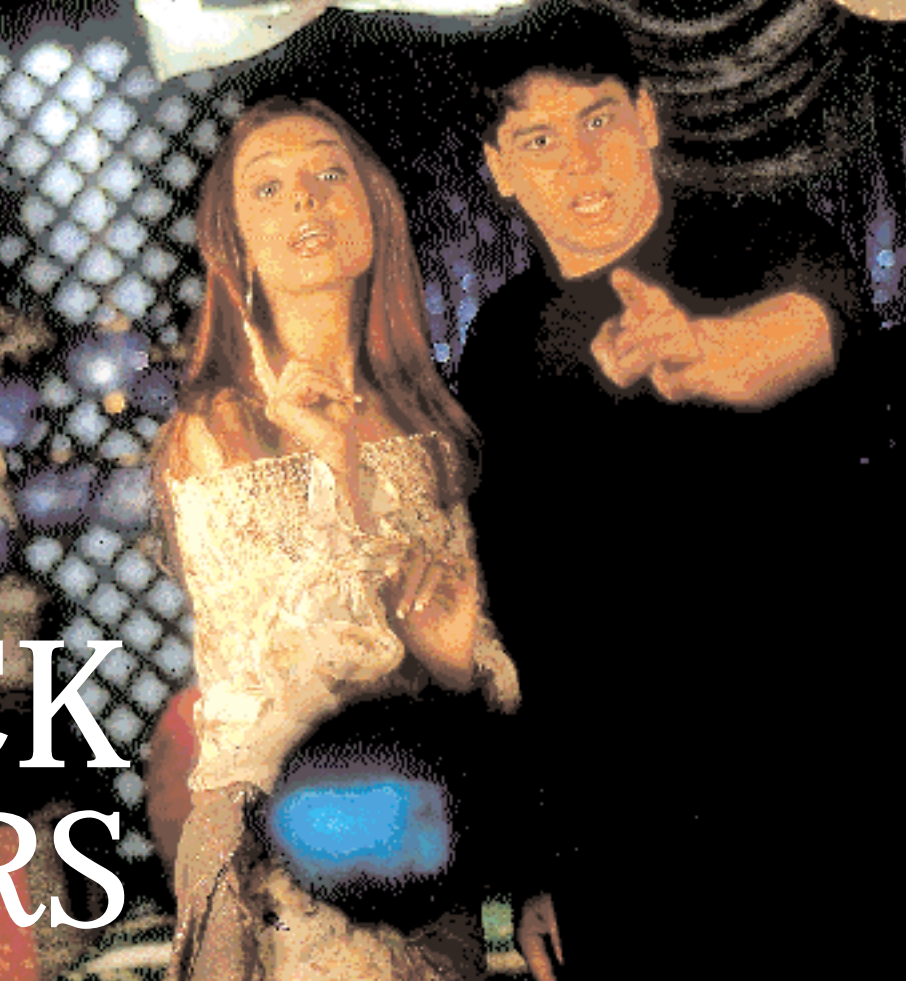


Have a relationship problem or AIDS anxiety? A comforting shoulder is just a button away. But think before you take the counselling to heart.

QUICK FIXERS



FAWZAN HUSAIN

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

NURSING A BROKEN heart and on the brink of despair? "Chill out, sweetheart. Don't take it so seriously." Studies are proving a nightmare? "C'mon, be positive. Just concentrate harder."

It's a world without worries, and a solution to just about every problem is a remote control away. All the *dosts* (friends) and *hamsafars* (companions) you may ever need are out there riding the air waves, spouting psychobabble wrapped in honey-laced words. The idiot box is brewing instant wisdom, the radio thriving on instant healers. These are the veejays and radio jockeys dishing out music with a liberal dose of advice to soothe many a frayed heart.

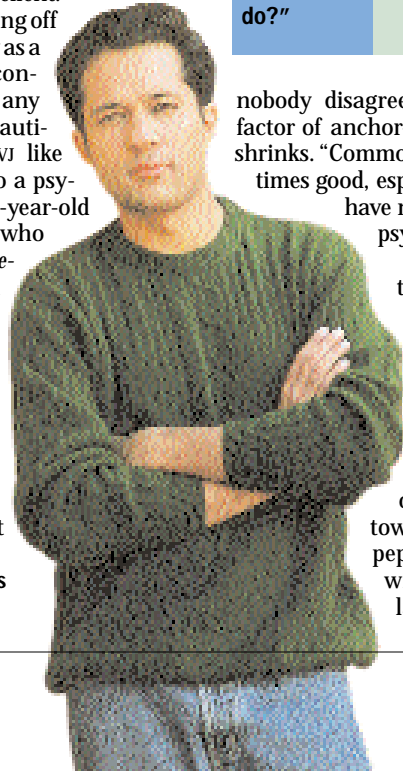
Even as mental health professionals—the few that there are in India—wonder about the stigma attached to psychotherapy, celebrity anchors are creating an unprecedented flux. AIR FM features more than one letter-based programme every day with hundreds of listeners writing in. On TV, the Malaika Arora-Cyrus Broacha anchored *MTV Loveline* and the Keith-anchored *Just Request* on B4U are becoming the favourite programmes for those keen to overcome the pitfalls of love. Seema

Verma, who earlier anchored *Khat Aapke Geet Hamare*, labelled the most popular radio show on Delhi's Times FM, says she receives about 1,300 letters per week. Fade out: the wise, know-all *mashimaas*. Zoom in: young, articulate, glamorous we-are-there-for-you anchors. They have a prescription for everything: dark circles under the eyes, work worries, heartache or the current irritant in the latest mosquito repellent.

But before writing off poppsychotherapy as a societal disorder, consider this. "I would any day confide in a beautiful and sensible *vj* like Malaika than go to a psychologist," says 22-year-old Sumit, a student who has written to *Loveline* four times and swears it has helped every single time. "I feel good the way Malaika and Cyrus sound so upbeat and confident about everything."

Nobody, but

NANDA: Experience is qualification enough



PSYCHO-SOLUTIONS: THE FINAL WORD

"I love her very much, but I just don't have the courage to tell her so. What should I do?"

"Why don't you rehearse with an apple or an orange and then go up to her and say it?"

CYRUS BROACHA, MTV

"We don't sell solutions. Both the problem and solution lie within you or in your social context. Explore it."

ANITA GHAI, Psychologist

"I was forced by my friends to visit a prostitute thrice. I am worried if I now have AIDS."

"Go for a test after three months. Till then don't have sexual intercourse with anybody."

N. JOSHI, AIR FM

"The PCR test can detect the HIV virus immediately. Till then, as a precaution, do not have unprotected sex."

AIDS counsellor

"The guy I loved married someone else due to family pressure. I am heart-broken."

"If he gave in so easily to his family's expectations, maybe you should rethink your love for him."

KEITH, B4U

"Relationship issues cannot be solved by casual jargon. That would be treating them lightly."

JITENDRA NAGPAL, Psychiatrist

"My parents torture me. All they want me to do is study. I don't want to do anything with them."

"Concentrate on studies, no TV, no friends. So that you can make your parents proud of you next year."

MANEESHA DUBEY, AIR FM

"Why is the student not able to concentrate? What is his relationship with his parents?"

A. SHARMA, Psychiatrist

ARORA AND BROACHA: Celebrity appeal

reinforcement. While both admit it is only superficial help, they agree that part of the magic is the celebrity appeal. Such shows get letters from people in age-groups varying from teenage to mid-40s, busting the notion that it is a trend limited to young sooth-seekers.

"The emotions in everyone's lives are the same. So why can't sensitive *vjs* suggest remedies?" asks Keith, who falls back on personal experience to address the problems. So does Sameep Nanda, another *RJ* who anchored the top-rated English letter-based show *Love Is In The Air* on Delhi's Times FM. "People deeply connect with anchors which sets a high benchmark of responsibility for us," he quips in his rich baritone.

Other anchors take the friend-philosopher-guide role a bit too seriously. Take Maneesha Dubey, anchor of the AIR FM programme *Geet Aapke Naam Se*. "I am emotionally attached to it," she says of her popular show. "I work hard to include inspiring quotes from psychologists and philosophers," she adds, offended that pop therapy could be considered questionable. She pleads, convinces, light-heartedly disagrees but never forgets to remind her listeners she

Despite the feel-good thrust, the remedies sometimes don't even scratch the surface. "Anchors are not trained to comprehend the circumstances of the person writing in and can at best give advice that suits millions," says psychiatrist Avdesh Sharma. "A real therapy session requires a wider perspective, several facts to understand the problem and the personality as well as look at the social support systems," he explains.

The people's confidence in writing to glamorous, successful anchors is easily explained: anonymity, absence of stigma, thrill of their name being spoken by a celebrity. It is also free, unlike professional help which comes for a price most people in India can't afford.

Can the addiction to helpline music shows be harmful? While Arora and Broacha are quick to point out that they do not air serious issues, referring them

KEITH: Falling back on wit and common sense to dish out advice

FAWZAN HUSAIN



cares for them, occasionally in an insufferable sugary tone. Something a real counsellor never does. Trained mental health professionals may offer suggestions to handle troublesome situations, but they essentially facilitate people to help themselves. They do not interfere with prescriptive answers or confuse scientific explanations with smart quotes.

Common sense, sometimes the only qualification needed to counsel, is easily accepted in India where everybody has a battalion of advisers. But real therapy isn't just about common sense or positivity couplets. "It is a very slow, laborious process," says clinical psychologist Sadhana Vohra. "Feel-good counsel on air is about garnering market share. What has it got to do with mental health?" she asks.



DUBEY: Saving souls is a passion

to specialists, every show doesn't have a similar demarcation. "A letter written by someone in distress may be his or her last call for help, but the anchor may not be able to understand that," warns Sharma. Take the National Aids Control Organisation-sponsored *Film Hit Parade*, on AIR FM, which invites letters on AIDS awareness and offers counsel. Neither of the two *RJs*—Narendra Joshi and Sunita—have any relevant training though Joshi insists they do their best to offer logical and positive assurance.

Vague, all-will-be-well promises sound good but do they mean anything at all when they are churned out by the dozen? "It is not about causing harm," says Vohra. "An important part of the human journey is to learn to differentiate between plastic and wood." ■