

Highlighting mental health issues

October is Mental Health Awareness Month, and 10 October was Mental Health Awareness Day.



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The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”.

The international theme for World Mental Health Day (10 October 2021) is Mental Health in an Unequal World, which couldn't be truer for South Africa.

SA State of mental health

Before Covid-19 struck, it was already reported that three out of 10 South African adults had suffered or would suffer from mental disorders during their lifetime.

The state of mental health in South Africa has been under the spotlight for many years, highlighting the lack of resources, facilities, human resources and community mental health.

Less than one in 10 people living with mental health conditions in South Africa receives the care they need.

“The state of mental healthcare in South Africa was in crisis long before Covid-19, and we need to ensure that mental health is prioritised across all sectors, provinces, and ages, to help the growing demand for mental health services,” says Dr Colinda Linde, clinical psychologist and South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) Board Chairperson.

Covid-19 impact

The mental health consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic are staggering.

“We know that Covid-19 has impacted all aspects of mental health,” says Linde.

She says this includes those living with a mental health issue before Covid-19 as well as many more people across the globe experiencing issues because of the stressors of Covid-19.

“This has led experts around the world saying that the mental health impact is now the second pandemic to come out of Covid-19,” she adds.

A study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (2020) reported that 33% of South Africans were depressed, that 45% were fearful, and 29% were experiencing loneliness during the first lockdown period.

“SADAG’s Helplines have received over 466,400 calls since January 2021, with one in every five calls being a suicide related issue,” says Cassey Chambers, operations director.

“We are continuing to see an increase in the number of calls to our Helplines each and every day, with 1,800 to 2,200 incoming calls per day,” adds Chambers.

Debt

Covid-19 has also led to many South Africans struggling in a fragile economy, with many experiencing the mental health issues associated with being over-indebted.

April last year, a survey by personal finance website JustMoney.co.za revealed that the coronavirus pandemic had “significantly or very significantly” affected the family earnings of three-quarters of ordinary South Africans.

The vast majority had less than R5,000 available as an emergency reserve.

High risk group

Social surveys report that university students have the largest proportion of mental illnesses amidst all the age groups.

An estimated 800,000 people pass on by suicide worldwide each year.

It is the second most common cause of death in people aged 15 to 29 and university students around the world are more at danger of suicidal behaviour than the general population.

A specific study revealed that 24.5% of a large sample of South African students experienced some type of suicidal ideation in the two weeks prior to their interview.

A study conducted by Stellenbosch University among 1,337 students of different backgrounds revealed that as many as 12% of college students experience anything from moderate to severe symptoms of depression and 15% report moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety.

Almost three-quarters of respondents in a survey of 3,800 University of Cape Town students cited mental health issues

such as depression and anxiety as their greatest challenge during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

South African data also revealed that in the previous 12 months, 20.8% of first-year students had experienced anxiety, 13.6% had experienced depression and students' thoughts about suicide began to rise if they had either of these mental illnesses.

Stigma

The stigma associated with mental health issues are still rife in society at both a local and global level.

“Over the last 27 years, we have been able to break some of the stigma around mental illness, having more people share their own stories and experiences has helped us greatly to break the stigma around mental illness.

“But more needs to be done to help encourage more people to get help and let them know that it's okay not to be okay, but that there is help and they are not alone, more activity is needed in rural areas with poverty, fewer clinics and limited mental health care” says SADAG founder, Zane Wilson.

The dominant mental health issues are depression, anxiety and suicidal ideations.

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