

# Why South Africa needs registered counsellors

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Once stigmatised and marginalised, mental healthcare is now centre stage. Over the past few decades, there has been growing mainstream acceptance that we need to attend to our emotional well-being with the same concern that we apply to our physical health. Mental healthcare is not just for some people facing serious challenges, we can all be affected by issues such as anxiety and depression, and many South Africans battle with substance abuse. In 2022, it was estimated that untreated anxiety and depression cost the South African economy around R200bn due to work absenteeism and lack of productivity.



When it comes to mental health, South African society faces critical challenges. The prevalence of crime and violence, poverty and unemployment create a continual high-stress environment. It is common for long-term stress to induce and exacerbate mental health issues. In addition, the country's mental healthcare system is under-developed and under-resourced. As a result, mental healthcare remains out of reach for the majority of South Africans.

While strides have been made in reducing stigma attached to mental health, there's still a long way to go. More education and awareness of mental health conditions and solution is urgently needed to overcome stigma and bridge cultural barriers to accessing mental healthcare.

Dr Vikki Botes, head of Faculty for Applied Psychology at [SACAP \(The South African College of Applied Psychology\)](#) says, "Our current mental healthcare infrastructure is not meeting the needs of people in the most traumatised communities. Registered counsellors have been identified as an important category of registered healthcare workers to provide greater access to mental health services in South Africa. Registered counsellors are capable of early intervention, creating vital community awareness and empowering people to improve challenging life situations."

## Training of qualified registered counsellors in SA

South African registered counsellors undergo rigorous training and education to prepare them for their role in the country's healthcare system. Individuals must complete a [Bachelor of Psychology \(Psych\)](#) or a [BPsych Equivalent degree](#). Their

training includes a supervised internship or Work Integrated Learning component. Once qualified, they must register with the HPCSA (Health Professions Council of South Africa).

Registered counsellors are qualified to provide counselling to help people in crisis cope with stress and anxiety, and they can provide trauma and grief counselling. They are trained to screen people to find out whether they need referrals to psychologists who can diagnose mental illnesses, or to psychiatrists who are qualified to prescribe mental health treatments. Registered counsellors frequently collaborate with other healthcare professionals and work on interdisciplinary teams alongside doctors and nurses, psychologists and social workers.

### **The role of registered counsellors**

**Community-based presence** – One of the primary roles of registered counsellors is to make mental healthcare services more accessible to South Africans, and therefore they often work in community-based settings. In the more rural provinces, the only mental healthcare professionals may be at the state hospital, and therefore there is a great need for more registered counsellors who can be deployed to provide services at primary healthcare clinics, schools and via community-based projects.

**Individual and group counselling** - Registered counsellors provide culturally sensitive, individual and group counselling sessions tailored to the unique needs of their clients. They provide a safe and confidential space for individuals to explore thoughts, emotions and experiences. Through evidence-based therapeutic techniques, registered counsellors help their clients develop coping skills, improve their mental well-being, and navigate life's challenges.

**Mental health education and advocacy** - Registered counsellors play a pivotal role in raising awareness about mental health issues in South Africa. They engage in public education and advocacy to reduce stigma and promote mental health. By conducting workshops, seminars, and community outreach programmes, they empower individuals and communities to better understand mental health, to recognise signs of distress, and find pathways to ongoing support and treatment.

**Crisis intervention and support** - In times of crisis, such as natural disasters, community violence, or personal emergencies, registered counsellors provide critical psychological first aid and support. Their expertise enables them to help individuals and communities cope with the emotional aftermath of traumatic events. This immediate assistance is crucial in reducing the long-term psychological impact of trauma and helps to improve community resilience.

Dr Botes says, “This is a career path for people who want to make a difference in people's lives and a contribution to better South Africa. Registered counsellors have the potential to ease the pressure on the state mental healthcare system, as they expand mental healthcare services to more South Africans. Because they provide primary preventative and developmental interventions, they play a critical role in the mental healthcare environment. Early intervention in a mental health crisis or a challenging life situation can prevent escalation, divert people from substance abuse, self-harm or suicide ideation. For young people it can improve school attendance and educational performance. For working adults, it can limit absenteeism, help people maintain their productivity and prevent job loss.”

SACAP is one of few higher education institutions in South Africa which trains Registered Counsellors through its BPsych and BPsych Equivalent programmes. Both programmes are CHE-and HPCSA accredited. The BPsych programme is a four-year, full-time course and is available at SACAP's Cape Town and Johannesburg, campuses. Applications for the 2024 academic year for the BPsych programme close on 17 November 2023.

The BPsych Equivalent programme is an 18-month, full time course and is available at SACAP's Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria campuses. Applications for the 2024 academic year for the BPsych Equivalent programme close on 29 September 2023.

Dr Botes concludes, “SACAP's qualified registered counsellors play an indispensable role in the mental health ecosystem. As the country continues to work towards breaking down barriers to mental health care, registered counsellors are at the forefront, providing support, education, and advocacy to individuals and communities in need. Our BPsych graduates make

contributions that are instrumental in building a healthier and more resilient South Africa.”

Apply for SACAP'S Bachelor of Psychology programme [here](#).

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