

Mental health revisited

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A staggering 450 million people world-wide have varying degrees of mental health problems. When you consider that HIV is considered a pandemic, with 35 million people infected, mental health issues, although not necessarily life-threatening, are a significant problem.

So what is mental illness?

Mental illness is defined as any behavioural or mental pattern that causes significant distress or impairs functioning. It can occur as a once off, be persistent or recur. The common denominator being the debilitating nature of the condition.

A mental illness affects the way a person experiences and behaves in the world around them. It is not a sign of weakness or madness and nothing to be ashamed of. It is a recognised medical condition in the same way as diabetes and high blood pressure. It can affect anyone, regardless of race, religion, income or age. The good news is it's a condition that can be managed and treated. Most people who experience mental health problems recover fully, or are able to live with and manage them, especially if they get help early on.

It often doesn't have only one cause but can be influenced by a combination of biological, psychological and social factors. Anxiety disorders and depression are the most common mental health problems but others include: Eating disorders; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD); bipolar mood disorder; psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and personality disorders. Substance abuse, such as drugs and alcohol, is also classified under mental illness.

"This is why it's important to get the help and support you need," says Gerhard Van Emmenis, Principal Officer of Bonitas Medical Fund, which focuses on mental health as one of the cornerstones of good health.

The magnitude of mental health problems

Misconceptions about mental health issues - not just in South Africa, but globally - often result in people not receiving the correct diagnosis or treatment. Considering that an international survey revealed that one in three people will be affected by mental illness in their lifetime and mental disorders have increased by 22.7%, it's unsurprising that it is becoming a focus amongst healthcare providers. Over 17 million South Africans are dealing with various forms of anxiety disorders.

The link between mental and physical health

According to Harvard Medical School, "We cannot expect to attain good health without paying attention to mental health problems. Similarly poor mental health can negatively impact on physical health, leading to an increased risk of some conditions. Depression has been linked to 67% increased risk of death from heart disease and a 50% increase in risk of death from cancer. This is mainly because people with mental health conditions are less likely to receive the physical healthcare to which they are entitled.

Battling the stigma

The Mental Health Society says that, "The social stigma attached to mental health and the discrimination exacerbates patients' condition. It often prevents people from seeking treatment. And, if they do, makes it harder to recover."

"Coping with a mental illness is challenging for both the patient as well as family and friends, without having to deal with the

added burden or discrimination," says Van Emmenis. "Fortunately increasingly well-known and influential people who are suffering from, or have overcome mental illness are being more open and talking about it. This will go a long way to debunk myths, negativity, discrimination and judgement. We all need to learn as much as we can about the specific illness to be supportive and understanding. Above all, we need to ensure the person gets the help they need."

It is widely accepted that there is a huge amount of stress related to economic uncertainty, political instability and poor socio-economic conditions. This too, has also added to the burden of mental health issues in South Africa.

Recognising the signs

The signs and symptoms of mental illness can vary but, in general, you may find you, your loved one, family member or friend experiencing any of these:

- Being frequently sad, depressed and gloomy for long periods
- Feeling overwhelmed by life's problems
- Major changes in eating habits resulting in weight loss or gain
- Struggling to concentrate and make decisions
- Loss of energy and lack of motivation
- Constant stress and anxiety over work, finances, life, friends and family
- Emotionally distant
- Frequently tearful
- Having difficulty sleeping, or sleeping more than usual
- Loss of interest in activities
- Being easily irritated and more aggressive than usual
- Having thoughts of death or suicide
- Drug or alcohol abuse may also be a sign of underlying mental illness

Help is at hand

If you or someone you know, recognise or experience any signs of mental illness it is important to seek help as soon as possible. If someone close to you is showing signs, talk to them about getting help. Go and see your doctor, a psychologist or even a social worker - support and assistance is available. Remember mental issues will not go away on their own.

There are specialised mental health programmes in place through most medical aids and most mental illnesses can be effectively treated by health professionals and community-based services, or NGOs. This may include access to medication, therapy and counselling.

The Mental Health Programme (MHP) from Bonitas, which forms part of the Fund's Managed Care initiatives, is aimed at improving quality of life and empowering people with mental health issues to manage their condition. It is education driven and offers support for loved ones too.

Helping yourself

In addition to support from the medical fraternity there are ways in which you can proactively help the healing process, these include:

- **Staying active.** Studies show that regular exercise can help to combat depression. Besides lifting your mood, it offers other health benefits, such as lowering blood pressure, protecting against heart disease and improving self-esteem and sleep patterns. Set small daily activity goals and work from there.
- **Follow a healthy diet.** Lay off the junk food rather eat fresh, healthy, tasty foods
- **Don't hesitate, meditate!** You need to keep your stress levels down so perhaps consider signing up for a meditation, yoga or pilates. Or, find an artistic outlet that will help you unwind

- **Sleep is important.** Try to get between seven and eight hours sleep per night, talk to your doctor if you have trouble sleeping or if you feel like sleeping all the time
- **Steer clear of alcohol and illegal substances.** These will worsen the situation in the long run.
- **Write it down.** Many people with depression find it helps to write down their thoughts on paper.

"Considering the number of people suffering from mental health issues, not only in South Africa but around the world, perhaps it's time for us to view this as a 'disaster area within healthcare'," says Van Emmenis. "We need to focus not only on management and cure but also on prevention."

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