Mental illness a big issue in SA, but awareness is lagging

In South Africa, mental illness is a far bigger issue than most people believe. One in three South Africans will suffer from mental illness in their lifetime according to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG). Despite this high number, only a quarter of those suffering from mental illness will either seek or receive treatment.

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental illness as a combination of abnormal thoughts, perceptions, emotions, behaviour and relationships with others. Mental disorders include depression, bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia and other psychoses, dementia, intellectual disabilities and developmental disorders including autism.

"The problem facing South Africa, and countless other countries, is that there are many people suffering from mental illness that is not even aware of it. This is particularly true for women in the rural areas of South Africa, as they are not even aware that there is a thing like mental health and what it means to suffer from mental illness," explains Graham Anderson, chief executive officer of Profmed, a medical aid exclusively for graduate professionals.

One of the most common forms of mental illnesses worldwide is depression. The WHO estimates that over 300 million people suffer from depression worldwide and that it is one of the leading causes of disability. As much as one in six South Africans suffer from depression, according to SADAG.

Interestingly, the WHO also indicates that depression is more prevalent among women than men. Anderson explains that similar to men, women suffer from various mental illnesses in certain time periods of their lives, like postpartum depression.

It's chemical and it's real

"The most important thing is to understand that mental illness is a chemical condition, it is very real. Mental issues need to be treated properly and you need to take the correct medication. The proper diagnoses and treatment can successfully control many mental issues that are common throughout the world," says Anderson.

Anderson explains that if left untreated, mental illness can lead to a number of other serious issues. "Because people live with a mental issue that is not being properly treated, this could cause some people to seek refuge in alcohol and drugs, just in order to cope with it. This is extremely dangerous and irresponsible. Mental illness is not like getting a cold or high blood pressure. It is a recognised disease that can be prevented. Once you have it, or you think you have it, you must seek medical treatment," says Anderson.

There have been many innovations in the treatment of mental illness. Medication is still the most common way to treat mental illness, but consulting a psychologist could also help to treat many forms of mental illnesses. "If you find that you're not coping mentally with life, there's no shame in seeking help. We know far more about the brain today than ever before and continue to make new discoveries," concludes Anderson.

If you are experiencing any issue that you think could be the start of a mental problem, see your family doctor immediately, who can then recommend a therapist depending on what you need.

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