

Growing demand for mental health assistance among South African youth

Similar to young people worldwide, South African youth face significant mental health challenges stemming from universal experiences such as the climate crisis, economic uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and social-media pressures.



Source: Supplied.

However, distinct challenges specific to South Africa's socioeconomic landscape also play a crucial role in affecting the well-being of its youth.

According to a survey recently conducted by The South African College of Applied Psychology (Sacap) more than 60% of the youth are concerned about depression (61%) and anxiety (65%). Sacap's online survey canvassed 850 internet-connected respondents aged between 17 and 20 years who are recent school leavers or currently in Grades 11 and 12.

Head of Sacap's Johannesburg campus, Jogini Packery says, "Research shows that the top five mental-health issues facing youth globally are anxiety, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders and self-harm and suicidal behaviours. However, there's a distinctly South African context to the challenges faced by the youth in South Africa.

"These impacts are related to high crime, the prevalence of domestic violence and substance abuse, the socioeconomic crisis, lack of government funding towards early mental-health intervention, and educational challenges in South Africa. So, we see post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse and risky behaviours, depression and anxiety, suicide and self-harm, and sexual- and reproductive-health issues on the rise.

Systemic decay's impact

"I believe that systemic decay is the leading cause of our youth facing the psychological stressors that they do, and the lack of effective coping strategies creates barriers to their wellness. Despite the increasing need for youth mental-health focus, early intervention is simply not a priority of community funding and campaigns.

"One of the few affordable counseling resources available to young South Africans is The Youth Hub at Groote Schuur Hospital Adolescent Centre of Excellence.

Genevieve Burrow, a registered counsellor and the counselling centre coordinator of The Youth Hub says, "The rapid development of technology and increased exposure and accessibility to social media creates difficulties for Gen Z, as these elements may affect their emotional well-being and mental health.

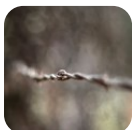
"Stress and anxiety may develop because of the increase in cyberbullying and online harassment. Additionally, the need for approval, acceptance, validation, and instant gratification on social media further affects mental health."

Youth eager to seek mental-health support

The *Frame Your Future* survey found that 61% of South African youth would "definitely" go for six-monthly mental health check-ups if these services were available free of charge.

"There has been a rise in understanding and awareness of issues relating to mental health in recent years," says Burrow. "This has resulted in more honest discussions about mental health and less stigma associated with seeking help. Compared to earlier generations, young people today may be more likely to recognise and seek help for mental-health issues.

"Due to this increased awareness, it may appear to some as if Gen Z is less resilient or has fewer effective coping mechanisms when in fact, they may just be more forthcoming about their emotional and mental health difficulties."



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Katja Hamilton 6 Jan 2022



While young South Africans are open to accessing mental-health support, the country faces a crisis of service delivery. The challenges include:

- Lack of government funding and resources for increased mental-health services.
- Lack of integration of mental health into primary health care to promote early detection, prompt intervention, and increased access to mental health assistance.
- Widespread scarcity of mental health practitioners.
- Slow uptake of tele-health solutions providing mental-health services.
- Lack of early intervention and prevention programmes to foster mental-health awareness, educate children about mental health in the classroom, combat stigma, and provide early intervention services for vulnerable groups.
- Lack of community-based support services to give people with mental-health disorders ongoing support and treatment choices.

There is a need to address equity so that South Africans regardless of financial status, colour, ethnicity, or geographic location, have access to and can afford mental-health treatments. Awareness-building is important to keep lessening the stigma associated with seeking mental-health care so that people can do so without being judged or subjected to prejudice.



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28 Jul 2023



For Sacap, which is a leading provider of tertiary-education programmes rooted in applied psychology and makes an impact in developing graduates in the counselling, coaching and social-work fields, the mental well-being of their students is an institutional priority.

Packery concludes, "Sacap has a 360-degree support strategy for all our students. Psycho-social support is embedded in their learning journey with us. We strive to cultivate emotional and self-awareness, critical thinking skills, a sense of social responsibility, a sound ethical foundation, professionalism, entrepreneurial vision, and an attitude of excellence in all our graduates.

"We recognise that youth are in an exciting time of self- and social exploration but this can also be a scary time for many. There are services and programmes available to help navigate through the scary parts. You need only to use your available devices for the greater good of yourself and your peers."

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