

# OPINION | TAKING ON OUR LAND'S MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES – AND WINNING

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(John McCann/M&G)

One in six South Africans suffers from anxiety, depression, or substance abuse disorders. That is a figure presented by the South African College of Applied Psychology in 2018 in a pre-Covid existence.

Fast forward to 2022 and I think we can all agree that we would be lucky if only one in six of our countrymen and women battled with mental health issues. We cannot deny that people's mental health has taken severe strain and the issue continues to spiral out of control, that is unless we are prepared to close the gaps that exist.

According to figures from the World Health Organisation, South Africa experienced a more than 36.4% increase in anxiety disorder prevalence during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The country also saw a more than 38.7% increase in the prevalence of major depressive disorders over the same period.

If the abovementioned one-in-six statistic is to be taken into consideration, then it won't be long before the whole nation is battling with a decline of mental health. This would be the beginning of the end of our South African dream.

This is not just a South African problem either. Research provided by a WHO mental health and Covid-19 scientific brief suggests that the pandemic and its subsequent restrictions led to a worldwide surge in mental health problems, which included rampant depression and anxiety.

The data from this report indicated that there was an increased risk for young people as the longer-term impact of the pandemic and associated economic recession on mental health and suicide rates remains a concern.

Given South Africa's extraordinary high levels of youth unemployment, this spells disaster for the mental health of our youth and presents a looming crisis for our nation. If not treated with the utmost care and haste, we could find ourselves with a mass grave of young men and women who take their own lives because they feel they have nowhere else to go.

The reality of declining mental health is that it's a major risk factor for suicide. It may not be something we want to think about, but the harsh reality is that suicide is the fourth most common cause of death among young people worldwide — particularly affecting vulnerable and marginalised populations (something South Africa is not short of).

As we face a significant shortage of available mental healthcare skills in South Africa, our greatest challenge lies in closing the gaps brought about by increased demand, lack of access, affordability and even acceptance of the need for care of mental health issues within our communities.

Our country lies on the precipice of impending psychological doom, and it lies with us to improve our population's mental health by creating an environment that enables access to affordable and quality care.

As South Africa's largest health risk management services provider, at Medscheme we have a unique window into what it might take for us to close mental health gaps. With over three million people under our healthcare umbrella, we analysed the data and found the mental health crisis can be overcome with a three-pronged approach.

First, we need to deal with the issue of acceptability. When it comes to this country's various health burdens, it has become a trend for stigma to overshadow action in many parts of our society. Mental health issues are not a sign of weakness, yet so many South Africans are ashamed to seek help. If we can engage with our communities about the prevalence and dangers of mental health issues, then we can finally identify and treat the millions who are suffering in silence, fearing that their fragility is a failure and should be hidden.

Second, access to appropriate levels of care needs to be improved. The trouble is, if we can't identify the issues, we cannot offer the appropriate solutions. This begins by setting up screening processes that provide actionable insights. It's not enough to simply identify the problem, our people need a solution before they end up as another statistic. Once you have identified the problem, it is imperative that we provide managed care that will offer long-term relief and ultimately stem the tide of mental trauma.

Finally, we cannot tackle mental health issues if we don't make it affordable to do so for all South Africans. Currently, most South Africans are under the impression that psychological and psychiatric care is reserved for the elite and cannot be accessed by the country's majority.

This is validated by the recent Global Mental Health Price Index 2022, which found South Africa to have the 24th most expensive mental healthcare in a list of 50 countries around the world. It doesn't have to be that way. The advent of digital technologies has given us the ability to provide virtual access to more affordable services appropriate for early interventions — which is exactly what we have begun to initiate with the Medscheme healthcare ecosystem.

Acceptability, access, and affordability – this is the triple-A approach to closing the mental healthcare gaps. If we focus on overcoming these three obstacles, then we can nurture a more resilient, compassionate and mentally fit nation. If we don't do it soon, we will continue to slip into despair.

**The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Mail & Guardian.**

**We make it make sense**

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