

Press Release

July 2012



MENTAL HEALTH OF SOUTH AFRICAN YOUTH UNDER THREAT

It is often said that the youth of today is the future, but due to the fact that mental illness is a serious problem and rapidly on the increase amongst young people — not only in South Africa but also on a global scale — that very future is under threat.

Cape Mental Health has implemented a ground breaking mental health promotion schools program in high schools in the Western Cape. The program, called MindMatters aims to promote mental health and to prevent and reduce the onset of mental illness. Young people are under tremendous pressure in their daily lives. Elroy Solomons, the Mind Matters program coordinator says *“The learners have learned to cope better with stressful situations and can now manage their lives more effectively.”* Elroy says “there had also been a sharp decrease in teenage pregnancies, abuse and violence at the schools.”

During July, which is nationally recognised as Psychiatric Disability Awareness Month, Cape Mental Health, a member of the South African Federation for Mental Health, will focus on “Youth and Mental Health”, and we are calling on all parents, educators and learners to work toward the prevention of mental illness and the promotion of mental health.

In South Africa there are many factors which could hinder the mental and physical well-being of individuals, especially as we are confronted with many challenges on a daily basis. Unemployment, substandard education, poor living conditions, low morale, substance misuse, risky sexual behaviour, bullying, violence, inadequate access to health care, and the high numbers of TIK addicts in the Western Cape are but a few examples of the challenges that could impact on young people’s mental well-being. The high number of young people using TIK and the subsequent drug induced psychosis has resulted in beds in psychiatric facilities being occupied by TIK users causing a shortage of beds for the rest of the mental health service users.

As a nation, it is our collective responsibility to ensure that the young people of this country are effectively equipped to deal with the pressures of daily living.

The SA Federation for Mental Health will be focusing nationwide on high schools where learners will receive trendy, user-friendly educational cards pertaining to mental health and illness. At the same time, all 17 mental health societies will also be addressing the general public at every available opportunity, encouraging parents to talk openly to their children and spouses about mental health and well-being.

To ensure that mental illness can be more effectively detected and treated in young people in a country such as South Africa, a dual approach is required. Firstly, we need to ensure that adequate mental health support structures are in place and equipped to provide high-quality care and support. Secondly, young people themselves must be aware of mental health issues, feel confident to address them, know of support options available to them and their families, and recognise that having a mental illness can be managed through effective health care and support. Lucille, a young women diagnosed with Bi-Polar

Mood Disorder said, “It was difficult to accept my condition at first however I persevered and attend occupational therapy classes at Valkenberg Hospital, Day Hospital appointments and Fountain House – a club house using a psycho-social rehabilitation model focusing on recovery. Accepting my diagnosis was half the battle won – now 1 year and 6 months later I am stable, coping and enjoying my work at CNA as a book and magazine specialist. Thanks to Fountain House for supporting me on my journey of recovery. *If it was possible for me then it is possible for others as well.*”

Sadly, stigma relating to the mental illness and discrimination against persons with mental illness and provide ongoing challenges that prevent people from getting the help and support they need.

When people think of disability, they tend to think about physical disabilities. But, mental illness (psychiatric disability) is also a disability. Yet the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental illness are often overlooked as priorities and are grossly underfunded by the State, despite research that points to mental illness being more prevalent than people may think.

In South Africa, the burden of mental illness is not only felt exclusively through the signs and symptoms of mental disorders, but it can be linked to many other disorders and other infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis; non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, as well as the high levels of violence and injury.

It is vital that we understand that mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of and many people learn to manage their illness and continue their lives. There is always hope. The earlier it is diagnosed and treated, the better one’s chances of recovering and living a full and normal life.

In its report on the South African Youth Context, the *National Youth Development Agency* includes a distressing section on the prevalence of suicide. Key points include the following:

- Global trends suggest that suicide is increasingly being reported amongst younger people (World Health Organisation, 2002).
- Suicidal behaviour is a major health concern in both developed and developing countries around the world.
- Many more people, especially the young and middle-aged, attempt suicide.
- A number of explanations for the rise in the suicide trend has been postulated, including:
 - Loss of social cohesion
 - Breakdown of traditional family structure
 - Growing economic instability
 - Unemployment
 - Rising prevalence of depressive disorders
 - School-related pressures

According to SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group):

- There are 23 completed suicides every day
- There are 230 attempted suicides every day
- 9.5% of all teen deaths are attributed to suicide
- The youngest suicide victim was 7 years old

By raising awareness of mental health in the youth on a national level during 2012-2013, the SA Federation for Mental Health could make a substantial contribution towards the improvement of mental health in young persons.

Cape Mental Health is the oldest mental health society in South Africa and provides a host of services for people with mental health need and mental disabilities. Contact: (021) 447 9040 for more information.

ENDS

Additional Information – Cape Mental Health

Cape Mental Health provides innovative and effective mental health services to people in disadvantaged communities in the Western Cape. This non-profit organisation has been active for 99 years and continues to work towards a society where people with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities are included at all levels of society and have access to education, training, work and social opportunities.

For more information contact Maleeka Mokallik on 021 4472416 or 021 4479040