



## Mental Health: A Universal Human Right

*“Mental health is an integral component of maintaining good overall health. When individuals are mentally healthy, they are able to realize their own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and make positive contributions to their community”.*

*World Health Organization, 2004*

### 1. Introduction

Mental health is growing as a public health priority and human rights imperative. World Mental Health Day (WMHD) is observed every year on 10<sup>th</sup> October and October is *Mental Health Month*. The day is dedicated to creating awareness about the importance of good mental health. WMHD 2023 is an opportunity for people and communities to unite behind the theme ‘Mental health is a universal human right’ to improve knowledge, raise awareness and drive actions that promote and protect everyone’s mental health as a universal human right.<sup>1</sup> The day also marks the foundation of the World Federation for Mental Health in 1948, which is an international membership organization aiming to prevent mental and emotional disorders, and to provide proper treatment, care and promotion of mental health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “one among eight people globally are living with mental health conditions. An increasing number of adolescents and young people are affected by mental health issues.”<sup>2</sup>

Professor Mark Tomlinson points out that “recent years have brought renewed focus on mental health. There are many reasons for this. Perhaps the most proximal one is the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns, school closures, quarantine, and the deaths of millions of people have resulted in a surge of distress, anxiety, depression and suicidality.”<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 and the harsh lockdown exposed the fault lines of vulnerability in our society and the mental health of South Africans has seldom been worse. As Dr Imtiaz Sooliman, of Gift of

the Givers, recently remarked “the country had not yet recovered from the impact of the pandemic as it has emerged with a ‘swathe’ of mental illness”.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. What Is Mental Health?

Over the past few years, mental health has come to describe not only severe mental conditions, but also an aspect of overall health. Ohrnberger *et al* point out that mental health is an integral component of maintaining good overall health. “When individuals experience poor mental health, they may start to withdraw and can experience debilitating symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Poor mental health can also affect physical health, as individuals might react by neglecting their physical health through inconsistent eating habits, poor hygiene, and general malaise.”<sup>5</sup> Good mental health is critical for the overall functioning of the body as it can impact our physical health both negatively and positively.

Poor mental health can result in depression and anxiety, but it also impacts the physical health and livelihood of the affected individuals. Depression is increasingly seen as a leading cause of disability due to its debilitating impact. Dr Frank Magwegwe of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) notes that “one in four South Africans report to be clinically depressed at work, while anxiety has now overtaken depression as the number one presenting mental health issue. Bullying in the workplace is a major source of poor mental wellbeing, especially for employees who are already marginal-

ised or suffering mental health issues”.<sup>6</sup> It can lead to psychological trauma and increase the risk of suicide.

### **3. Non-Medical Factors Impacting Mental Health**

It is important to note that good mental health depends on a delicate balance of factors, and that several elements may contribute to the development of mental health conditions. Stress and anxiety have emerged as the biggest concerns in modern times. According to a WHO analysis, anxiety spiked worldwide, along with depression, during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also an increasing understanding of the impact of non-medical factors on mental health. These include socio-economic conditions; the availability of employment opportunities; the degree of social connection and psycho-social support; a person’s level of education and the quality of their housing.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, researchers found that being female increased the risk of low mental health status by nearly four times. Those living in poverty also scored the highest for poor mental health.<sup>8</sup>

Simple trips to the grocery store to stock up on food or to the shops to buy clothing are increasingly stressful as the cost of living continues to rise. Eskom loadshedding, the increase in the cost of public transport, and the lack of employment opportunities all compromise mental well-being. Research conducted in 2021 found that over 20% of South African households were food insecure and that living in a food insecure household was associated with a higher risk of anxiety and depression. Access to food “largely depends on socio-economic status. People who are uneducated, the unemployed and those receiving a low monthly income are the most severely affected by inadequate food access”.<sup>9</sup> The rise in food insecurity during the COVID-19 lockdowns was accompanied by an increased rate of people screening positive for depressive symptoms.<sup>10</sup>

The recent death by suicide of Bongeka Buso, and the deaths of her three children, brutally illustrates the impact of extreme poverty. Eastern-Cape Police Commissioner, Lieutenant-General Nomthetheleli Mene, expressed her sadness and concern saying that “it is a deeply concerning and heart-breaking issue that women facing poverty can be driven to such despair. Socio-economic challenges can exacerbate their

vulnerability to mental health issues. Addressing poverty and promoting mental health support is crucial to prevent such tragedies”.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Nomboleko Simayile killed her four children, having sought help which was not forthcoming.<sup>12</sup> Both these tragedies are illustrative of the difficulties facing women-headed households with little support.

The WHO estimates that at least one in five people will suffer from mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder in the aftermath of a major emergency or disaster such as the recent flooding, the fire in Johannesburg, or the July 2021 political unrest. Refugees and migrants are another vulnerable group. Displaced girls and women have a higher risk of depression and anxiety. Commenting on the recent floods in Libya, Dr Ahmed Zouiten, WHO representative in that country, explained that mental health services are essential. “Broken bones can be mended, but psychological wounds – which are often invisible – take much longer to heal.”<sup>13</sup>

Those with mental health disabilities are more likely to be arrested than those without them. Repeat arrests are common for people facing extreme poverty, addiction and other issues often related to untreated mental health conditions.<sup>14</sup>

Research conducted by the UCT Children’s Institute found that “South African children are exposed to extraordinarily high levels of adversity, which increases their risk of developing mental health challenges”.<sup>15</sup> Sixty-three per cent of children in South Africa live below the upper-bound poverty line, and one in ten children have a diagnosable and treatable mental health disorder. These include “depression; anxiety; post-traumatic stress disorder; conduct, learning and substance-use disorders; as well as neurodevelopmental disorders such as attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder and autism”.<sup>16</sup> There is emerging evidence that mental health issues, stemming from climate and environmental shocks, can lead to increased perpetration of domestic violence and violence against children. Rising eco-anxiety among children and youth, caused by awareness of climate change and environmental degradation and fears of its consequences, adds to mental health problems.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, although the general perception of mental illness has improved over the past decades, studies show that “stigma against

mental illness is still powerful, largely due to media stereotypes and lack of education, and that people tend to attach negative stigmas to mental health conditions at a far higher rate than to other diseases and disabilities, such as cancer, diabetes or heart disease.”<sup>18</sup> This discourages those experiencing difficulties from seeking help.

#### 4. Services Available

There has been a dissonance between the enormous impact of mental illness on the public's health and the limited commitment to addressing these problems.<sup>19</sup> According to the second *Annual Mental State of the World Report 2021*, published in March 2022, South Africa ranks as one of the worst countries regarding mental health, having scored the lowest average score on the mental health wellbeing scale. The rate of ‘distressed’ or ‘struggling’ on the scale increased from 28.5% in 2020 to 36% 2022.<sup>20</sup>

According to Professor William Gumede, South Africa spends only 5% of its total health budget on mental health – putting us at the bottom of international benchmarks of public spending on mental health. This translates into less than one person in ten receiving mental health care. Poor South Africans are worse off when it comes to access to mental care – because of the lack of capacity, accessibility and resources in the public health sector for mental health care.<sup>21</sup>

A 2019 survey by the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town showed that, so severe are the shortages of mental health specialists, that only three provinces had child psychiatrists. The survey revealed that drugs for chronic mental illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder and anxiety were routinely unavailable.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, a recent paper by the Wits/Medical Research Council's Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit (DPHRU) reveals that 25.7% of South Africans are most likely depressed, with more than a quarter of respondents reporting moderate to severe symptoms of depression.<sup>23</sup>

In a move painfully reminiscent of the Life Esidimeni tragedy, the Gauteng Department of Social Development recently slashed the budget for social welfare services by R216-million. This will result in 10 000 to 12 000 people losing services and in the closure of many organisations offering mental health services, leaving many

without psycho-social support.<sup>24</sup> Recently, the Daily Maverick reported that the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital is in a state of crisis, with psychiatric patients being kept in untenable conditions which are abusive rather than therapeutic.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5. The Right to Mental Health Care

Mental health is a basic human right for all people. Everyone, whoever and wherever they are, has a right to the highest attainable standard of mental health. This includes the right to be protected from mental health risks, the right to available, accessible, acceptable, and good quality care, and the right to liberty, independence and inclusion in the community.<sup>26</sup> This year's *World Happiness Report* focuses on the growing consensus about how happiness should be measured and how national happiness can become an operational objective for governments.<sup>27</sup> The report found that the happiest countries tend to have high values for most of the critical variables that have been found to support well-being: income; healthy life expectancy; social support; freedom to make key life decisions; trust and generosity; and the absence of corruption.<sup>28</sup>

#### 6. Mental Health, Human Rights and Legislation

The personal is indeed political and “consequently, actions that successfully improve the overall mental health of the population are likely to be accompanied by other important benefits to society”.<sup>29</sup> The WHO and the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) are jointly launching new guidelines entitled *‘Mental health, human rights and legislation: guidance and practice’*, in order to support countries in reforming legislation so as to end human rights abuses and increase access to quality mental health care.<sup>30</sup> They also highlight the importance of community-based care services which are more accessible, cost-efficient and effective, in contrast to institutional models of mental health care.

The guidelines set out what needs to be done to accelerate deinstitutionalization and to embed a rights-based community approach to mental health care. This includes adopting legislation to gradually replace psychiatric institutions with inclusive community support systems and mainstream services, such as income support, housing assistance and peer support networks.<sup>31</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Introducing the new guidelines, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO Director-General, said that “mental health is an integral and essential component of the right to health. This new guidance will support countries to make the changes needed to provide quality mental health care that assists a person’s recovery and respects their dignity, empowering people with mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities to lead full and healthy lives in their communities”.<sup>32</sup> Many factors can protect people from

mental health conditions, including strengthening social and emotional skills; seeking help and support early on; developing supportive, loving, warm family relationships; and, in the case of children, having a positive school environment.

Professor Mark Tomlinson points out that “we have lost touch with the role that the deeply human needs of belonging, social connectedness, gratitude, kindness and hope play in our wellbeing, and how in fact they are likely to be the only way out of our current moment of psychic discontent”.<sup>33</sup>

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### Lois Law

#### Project Co-ordinator

[lois@cplo.org.za](mailto:lois@cplo.org.za)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-mental-health-day/2023#:~:text=World%20Mental%20Health%20Day%202023%20is%20an%20opportunity%20f>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thequint.com/fit/world-mental-health-day-2023-theme-history-significance-activities-and-awareness-quotes>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2023-10-09-human-mental-health-is-deeply-complex-and-cannot-merely>

<sup>4</sup> [https://mg.co.za/news/2023-10-16-imitiaz-sooliman-praises-resilient-south-africans/?utm\\_source=M%26G+Mornings&utm\\_campaign=227be61eff-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2023\\_08\\_09\\_08\\_19\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_-9fd518710b-%5BLIST\\_EMAIL\\_ID%5D&mc\\_cid=227be61eff&mc\\_eid=311c2454ab](https://mg.co.za/news/2023-10-16-imitiaz-sooliman-praises-resilient-south-africans/?utm_source=M%26G+Mornings&utm_campaign=227be61eff-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_08_09_08_19_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-9fd518710b-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D&mc_cid=227be61eff&mc_eid=311c2454ab)

<sup>5</sup> <https://positivepsychology.com/mental-health-quotes/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-10-10-5-ways-companies-can-support-the-mental-wellbeing-of-low-income-employees-and-those-battling>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.who.int/news/item/02-03-2022-covid-19-pandemic-triggers-25-increase-in-prevalence-of-anxiety-and-depression-worldwide>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/154543#risk-factors>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/opinion/2023/2023-04/1-in-5-south-african-households-begs-for-food--the-link-between-food-insecurity-and-mental-health.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/opinion/2023/2023-04/1-in-5-south-african-households-begs-for-food--the-link-between-food-insecurity-and-mental-health.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-08-07-desperate-eastern-cape-mom-kills-starving-children-and-hangs-h>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-20-premier-mabuyane-promises-support-to-eastern-cape-mom-who-bludgeoned-children-to-deat>

<sup>13</sup> WHO Media <Media@campaign.who.int>

<sup>14</sup> <https://news.microsoft.com/source/features/innovation/how-communities-are-creating-more-equitable-justice-systems-with>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2023-06-08-redress-mental-healthcare-for-children-and-adolescents-in-south-africa>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2023-06-08-redress-mental-healthcare-for-children-and-adolescents-in-south-africa>

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- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.wits.ac.za/news/latest-news/opinion/2021/2021-10/untreated-mental-illnesses-impact-sas-economy-social-and-family-stability.html>
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- <sup>27</sup> US analytics and advisory company Gallup, and the UN, publish an annual ‘World Happiness Report’.
- <sup>28</sup> <https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/674485/these-are-the-happiest-countries-in-the-world-in-202>
- <sup>29</sup> <https://positivepsychology.com/mental-health-quotes/>
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