

South Africa needs to accelerate its focus when it comes to addressing mental health issues

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International World Health Day is celebrated on 7 April. This year's celebration comes at a time when many health systems worldwide are looking for ways to address capacity issues and funding for essential services. Mental health is becoming a growing focal point, with many asking if enough is being done to address the issue appropriately.



Mehnaaz Olla Manager Mancosa School of Healthcare

"South Africa needs to accelerate its focus when it comes to addressing mental health issues if it wants to align with the global approach to the subject. While a lot has been done in South Africa to address mental health, the reality of the situation is that it is still a subject that needs significant focus from Government, both from a funding perspective and addressing existing stigmas that are associated with mental health," says Mehnaaz Olla, a Manager at the Mancosa School of Healthcare (SoH).

She adds that provided specific interventions are implemented within the next five years; South Africa can lead the continental charge regarding a holistic approach to addressing mental health.

Setting the scene

Olla points out that before we embark on this journey, it is essential to gain proper insight into the landscape when it comes to the prevalence of mental health in South Africa, who is seeking treatment, and the available treatment options.

A 2009 study points out that nearly 20% of South African adults reported that they were suffering from impaired mental health. The study adds that less than a quarter of this population seeks treatment to address these conditions.

"While this study paints an alarming picture, there are questions about whether more South Africans are experiencing mental health issues than the 20% reported in the study. There is a significant stigma attached to mental health issues in some cultures, with patients reportedly facing serious discrimination when they seek treatment. With this in mind, how many South Africans are reticent to report suffering from these issues?" asks Olla.

She adds that this is not the extent of the alarming situation that mental health patients find themselves in.

The World Health Organisation Global Health Observatory Data Repository reports that there are only 1.52 psychiatrists for every 100 thousand South Africans in South Africa. Further, 73% of these psychiatrists operate within the private sector, and only 50% of South Africa's public hospitals have psychiatrists. "These are focused on the large public health facilities in urban areas. This leaves mental health patients in rural areas with minimal support," says Olla.

A major root cause

Over the past five years, countries have dealt with the worst health pandemic since the Spanish Flu in 1918 and returning to everyday life after significant periods of forced isolation.

"Many people were scared and anxious during the COVID-19 lockdown. With little to do, they turned to social media as a news source and a tool to access communication platforms, allowing them to keep in touch with their family and loved ones. For many, technology became a significant lifeline over the past three years," points out Olla.

During Covid-19 pandemic, social media became an essential communication tool. However, it has turned into a problem that the South African youth find hard to address. "Social media has been the root cause of many mental health issues as the youth use the channels to compare themselves with others and to keep up with global trends. Social media is also a platform where significant cyberbullying takes place. When we were bullied at school (in a world that had limited access to technology), we could come home and enter a safe place to enjoy some time away from the problem. The forever connected nature of the internet and social media does not offer this luxury," points out Olla.

Another way in which technology is impacting mental health is in the workplace. "Advancements in technology have caused a lot of fears and anxiety about technology taking over jobs. With South Africa's unemployment crisis looming large, one can see why this can become a problem," says Olla.

How do we move forward?

The Mancosa SoH is actively contributing to collective efforts to improve the narrative when it comes to addressing mental health issues within the tertiary education landscape. "The SoH offers short learning programmes that specifically deal with mental health. Additionally, we try to incorporate mental health best practice principles in other SoH offerings," points out Olla.

She adds that the NHI is also a perfect opportunity to change the African mental health narrative. "Advancements in technology can offer significant levers of value when designing a universal health system that promotes equitable access to quality healthcare for all South Africans," says Olla.

Changing the narrative

Olla says that significant strides can be made through public awareness campaigns that change existing narratives when it comes to mental health.

A 2019 study points out that females are more open to seeking help for mental health issues than their male counterparts. "This is something that needs to be addressed. In 2019, over 13,000 suicides were reported in South Africa, over 10,000 of which were male. While we cannot unequivocally relate these to mental health issues, one assumes this is a major contributing factor. We need to encourage males to be more open about mental health issues," says Olla.

Related to this are existing cultural stereotypes that males are the providers of their families and must be resolute in their duties. "The world has changed; females are increasingly becoming co-providers for their families. The government needs to lead a campaign that addresses this, the stigma attached to mental health issues, and the pressures of being the major financial provider for their family," says Olla.

Finally, Olla says that people should leverage technology. "In his last televised interview in 2018, Steven Hawking said that since the start of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, there have been fears of mass unemployment as machines replace humans. Instead, the demand for human-based goods and services has risen in line with the increased capabilities of machines. We need to start using technology as a tool to help us do our jobs better rather than fear it," says Olla adding that Generation Alpha, being true digital natives, have a golden opportunity to harness the potential of technology for progressive digital transformation.

She concludes that this is merely the start of the blueprint for formulating a holistic plan to address mental health in Africa's most diversified economy.

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