Suicide takes its toll

According to Prof Lourens Schlesbacher, there are at least 23 suicides a day in South Africa—which is one suicide every 12 minutes—and this figure does not include the stigma involved in suicide.

However, data on suicides and other unintentional-injury deaths are not systematically tracked by any agency in the country, making accurate statistics hard to come by, says South Africa’s largest mental health NGO, the SA Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag).

Teen suicide prevention

Despite the increasingly concerning rate of teen depression and suicide—one in four South African teens has attempted suicide and one in three hospital admissions for suicide involve youth—most schools don’t have counsellors or psychosocial support systems in place. Sadag initiated a school-based suicide prevention programme—suicide shouldn’t be a secret—that goes class by class to empower youth to identify symptoms of depression and warning signs of suicide in themselves, their peers and loved ones; to know where to go for help; and how to contact Sadag. Sadag also trains teachers because giving power and advice to first-line responders helps them better cope in suicide crises.

Counselling containers in townships

There are many communities in South Africa that lack any access to mental health care. Diepsloot is an example with an ever-increasing population of about 300 000. Sadag has established a counselling container in Diepsloot that not only provides free counselling to residents but also outreach programmes with schools, churches, community groups, the police and clinics, and local shopping centres. Container counselling units can help entire communities and provide easy access, education, support and save costs. A container costs R650 000 per year to run, which includes providing counsellors, phones, brochures and materials, talks and support to the members of the community.

National suicide crisis lines

Sadag has been operating the national suicide prevention crisis lines (0800-676-676) for more than 12 years with no funding from the department of health—despite the massive costs involved in helping callers on the lines. Sadag says the line needs to be available 24 hours a day, but without funding this is simply not possible.

“Our lines run 7 days a week, from 8am to 8pm but depression and suicidal thoughts don’t stop when our lines close,” says Chambers. “Citizen reporter

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The SA Depression and Anxiety Group

info

SA suicide stats

▶ 10% of all unnatural deaths in adults and 9.5% in youth are because of suicide.
▶ There are about 23 a day, virtually every hour.
▶ Nearly two-thirds of all suicide victims are aged between 20 and 39.
▶ Nearly one-third of recorded suicides in South Africa are in Gauteng and there has been a 1.5x increase in suicidal deaths in the Transkei over the past five years.
▶ There are 4.5 male suicides for every one female suicide.
▶ One in four teens has attempted suicide.
▶ One in three hospital admissions for suicide involve youth.
▶ Less than 7% of mental hospital beds are for children and adolescents.

70%

of South Africans who attempted suicide had a mental health disorder

▶ 75% of people will not get the mental health treatment they need.