Briefing Paper 561   **December 2022**

Mental Health and Well-being

"Actions that successfully improve the overall mental health of the population are likely to be accompanied by other important benefits to society."[1]

1. Introduction

2022 has been the year during which most of the world emerged from the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. People crept out of their homes. Some went back to their offices and other places of employment, some continued to work at home, while others had no work to which to return. The masks came off and we could see the faces of others. Children returned to school. The retail industry, along with restaurants and other places of entertainment, opened up. Restrictions on the sale of alcohol were dropped. The vaccination drive resulted in herd immunity and the number of deaths due to COVID-19 dropped dramatically. However, the stress, anxiety, grief and worry of the pandemic and the lockdown imposed to prevent its spread have taken their toll on the mental health and well-being of our country, as has been the experience of many countries across the world. Mental illness is a growing public health problem which cannot be ignored.

2. The New Normal

COVID-19 exposed our vulnerabilities, the fragility of life, and its unpredictability. Furthermore, the geo-political/economic context of the world has shifted. Many economies are in recession, unemployment is high and there is a global fuel crisis. Inflation is universal. "We are living in a moment of deep geopolitical rifts and extraordinary economic uncertainty … the world is clearly not reverting to some pre-COVID status quo. Instead, a combination of underlying forces has

upended the previous world order and ushered in a period of profound disorder."[2] Climate change and extreme weather phenomena are creating humanitarian crises all over the world. The Kwa-Zulu Natal floods of earlier this year are testament to this.

Jon Foster-Pedley, dean and director of Henley Business School Africa, writes that "we are living in tough times. We have to acknowledge that. We are a wounded nation, suffering in a way from post-traumatic stress disorder – and that's now, not our historic legacy of pain and cruelty. The world has emerged from the rigours of lockdown that stress-tested all of us, particularly our businesses, beyond comprehension".[3] We are living in a time of profound socio-economic and psycho-social distress. For example, 2.2 million people lost their jobs in the second quarter of 2020 alone.

3. Well-being of Households

Household have had, and continue to have, a difficult time. Throughout the pandemic, many families have struggled with fears about COVID-19, unemployment and lock-downs – all while experiencing disruption to things such as school, childcare, social support services, routine, religious gatherings, and cultural and sporting events. Income and food insecurity have been major concerns, pushing many households into extreme poverty and resulting in an increase in child malnutrition. What has been stressful for some has been traumatic for others. Some families were particularly vulnerable. Those who experienced financial strain, poor quality hous-

ing, loneliness, pre-existing mental health problems, and gender-based violence reported worse child and parent mental health over this time. Help-lines were flooded with calls from people in distress, and it does not seem that this trend is decreasing.[4] Longitudinal research has already indicated that all this has had a negative impact on the mental health and food security of ordinary people, as well as an emotional toll on households across different urban neighbourhoods and rural communities, with the extent of frustration and anxiety often being determined by the spatial and structural location of participants.[5] "During this 'hard lockdown', many people in South Africa really struggled. Not only did they have financial difficulties, but the lockdown took an emotional and mental toll. The common themes, no matter where people lived, were feelings of anxiety, frustration and isolation. And as lockdown went on, those feelings got worse."[6] Families and children who have struggled during the pandemic need additional support in settling back into the 'new normal'.

4. Mental Health as a Continuum

Mental health can be seen as a continuum stretching from those who experience a positive sense of well-being, have good support systems and easy access to psycho-social and health care professionals and services, to those who are struggling with severe mental disorders.[7] The spectrum of mental health conditions is wide, and includes mental disorders of different severity and symptoms, such as depression, anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, eating disorders and neurodevelopmental disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorder (ASD). [8] However, there are social determinants such as poverty, violence and other external factors that can have a profound effect on levels of stress and mental wellbeing.[9] There is increasing evidence that the stress on our society is growing. At least one analyst has suggested the dramatic increase in the number of murders and contact crimes in data released recently is a result of this increased stress.[10]

5. Provision of Mental Health Services

Christina Teichmann of the FW de Klerk Foundation noted during October, which is Mental Health Month, that the provision of psychiatric and social services is woefully inadequate. She pointed out that "the wide range of mental health conditions makes specialised treatment by professional staff such as psychologists, psychiatrists, specialised counsellors and health workers a basic requirement. However, there is a massive shortage of psychologists and psychiatrists in the country – especially in the public sector. There are only a total of 451 psychologists within the public sector, with vacancy rates between 80% and 83% in Mpumalanga, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. The shortage of psychiatrists in the public sector is even more severe, with a psychiatrist/patient ratio of 1 to 3 338 295 for the Eastern Cape and 1 to 1 581 194 in Mpumalanga".[11]

The Department of Health states that the point of entry to mental healthcare services is primary health service centres, where there are mental health practitioners. In reality it is very difficult for those with mental health conditions to access such public clinics.[12] Clinics are chronically understaffed and services at clinics were interrupted during the pandemic. Those already receiving treatment might have had their supply of medication interrupted during the lockdown, as was the case for many of those suffering from TB and HIV. Immunization of children also decreased. The interruption in the supply of all these treatments has had considerable impact on the well-being of patients, and the drop in immunizations has also resulted in the re-emergence of childhood illnesses such as measles.

6. The Intersection of Mental Health and State Violence

In an answer to a parliamentary question from the Democratic Alliance, the Department of Health recently revealed that more than 6.5 million people in South Africa need professional mental health intervention, of which almost 1.3 million "need care for severe psychiatric conditions". But the reality is that South Africa has only 19 752 beds in both public and private mental health care facilities available.[13]

Speaking at a recent event organized by the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu Natal, researcher Manoko Ratala explored mental health and well-being within the context of a 'failed state'.[14] A failed state could be seen as one which "instead of building an inclusive economy, nurtured an exclusive one that benefitted few individuals while leaving millions destitute. Hence, we continue to suffer the ignominy of the

most unequal society in the world despite our abundant mineral resources".[15] Ratala pointed out that mental health is a silent crisis, with 67% of South Africans having no access to mental health care, and 9.7% of the population (which amounts to 4.5 million people) suffering from depression. This contributes to R232 billion lost to the economy due to absenteeism, illness and demotivation.

Mental health is indeed a silent crisis. 55% of the population suffer from anxiety and panic attacks. 46% experience financial pressure and stress. There has been an increase in substance abuse, with many non-drinkers turning to alcohol for comfort.[16] Irrational fears and paranoia are common, as well as withdrawal from social situations. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) reports that there are 23 known cases of suicide in South Africa every day and, for every person that commits suicide, 10 have attempted it.[17]

7. Children and Adolescents

Mental Health is a critical foundation for healthy relationships, a solid education and a more just and caring society, yet more than one in ten children in South Africa have mental health problems. One third of children under the age of 17 endure emotional abuse and bullying and, while they have no visible wounds, the impact is no less damaging than physical abuse. Moreover, there is a wide spectrum of physical and emotional neglect and of failure of nurture. Most suffer in silence and do not reach out for help.[18] According to SADAG, South African teens are the most at-risk group when it comes to suicide. "A quarter of young South Africans experience depression and anxiety, and up to 20% of high school pupils have tried to take their own lives. Sadly, self-harm is a significant factor in South African rural areas, where accessible mental healthcare is low and has a high stigma – with those suffering from mental health labelled as 'possessed'."[19]

There are only 20 child psychiatrists in South Africa working in the public healthcare sector.[20] One in five children have a mental health condition, but only 10% are able to access care due to issues around affordability or lack of resources. According to the South African Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP), state-funded specialist child and adolescent mental health facilities are only available in the Western Cape, Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu-Natal.[21] Dr Alicia Porter of SASOP argues that COVID-19 has disrupted the normal development of children, and that the long-term consequences will be more severe on this population than in our current adult population. "Collaboration between the departments of basic education, social development and health is critical. Mental health should be introduced in the school curriculum and teachers should be equipped with basic counselling skills."[22]

8. Impact of Digital Technology

Technology has increasingly blurred the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds, and the COVID-19 pandemic saw an exponential rise in technology and internet use. This has led to dramatic shifts in daily life and has changed the way children and adolescents live, socialise, move around and learn. Global estimates suggest that one in three internet users is a child. "Digital technology exposes children to information, social connection, education, online support groups and professional help. Yet, children engaging in the digital world are also exposed to a range of threats. These include inappropriate content (violent or sexual), undesirable contact with strangers and online bullying and victimisation."[23]

There is increasing public discussion and growing concern that digital technologies may contribute to mental health problems such as depression, self-harm and suicide among adolescents and children.[24] "Adolescents struggling with offline mental health problems may be more likely than others to seek out negative content online. This may amplify their existing mental health issues and may result in self harm. But social media may also be a source of mental health information, support and professional help."[25] It is critically important for parents and care-givers to monitor and foster digital resilience in children and adolescents; to provide guidance as to what risks they are likely to encounter at different ages; and to help them to know when they are at risk.[26] This can be particularly challenging for parents unfamiliar with digital technology. Furthermore, adolescents may well resent what they perceive as infringements of their privacy. Getting the correct balance right is important; there must be space for engagement around difficult issues. Adolescence is a difficult developmental phase and adolescents tend to act on impulse and to lack the ability to understand long term consequences, so

keeping the lines of non-judgemental communication open is important. Time out from digital screens is important, as are opportunities for family time as well as engaging in other activities such as games, sports, drawing, or cooking.

9. The Life Esidimeni Tragedy

The tragic deaths of 144 people that occurred when 2 000 mental health-care patients were transferred from Life Esidimeni facilities to ill-equipped and unprepared NGO facilities by the Gauteng provincial government, cast a long shadow and serve as a dreadful reminder of the failure of our health system to care for those with psychiatric and other mental health conditions. "A report by the Health Ombudsman on the tragedy, published on 1st February 2017, states that the constitutionally enshrined rights, such as the right to human dignity, the right to life, the right to freedom and security of person, the right to privacy, the right to an environment that is not harmful to health or well-being and the right to access quality health care services, were violated and totally disregarded by certain government officials and NGOs. The report points to the constitutional obligation of the South African government – as well as society as a whole – to respect the rights of people with mental health disorders and make quality health services accessible to all South Africans, irrespective of their socio-economic status or in which part of the country they live."[27]

10. Conclusion

Our society is overwhelmed by psycho-social, political, and economic upheaval, all of which are compromising the mental and emotional health of South Africans. Many say they are enduring depression and anxiety. Dr Alicia Porter reports that the rolling blackouts contribute to feelings of stress and anxiety: "The disruptions are difficult to predict, and because it's difficult to predict, it does increase a sense of helplessness and hopelessness which then contributes to the overall feeling of stress and distress."[28] Blackouts are a metaphor for the hopelessness which so many South Africans experience.

As we approach Christmas we might ponder on these words by Thomas Merton: "With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in the world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst."[29]

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[1] Elliott Goldner, Emily Jenkins, & Dan Bilsker, 2016

[2] https://theconversation.com/four-scenarios-for-a-world-in-disorder-193132?utm_me

[3] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-06-21-as-covid-curbs-end-staff-need-empathy-as-they-returnvc

[4] https://theconversation.com/anxiety-can-look-different-in-children-heres-what-to-lo

[5] https://theconversation.com/how-the-pandemic-lockdown-in-south-africa-affected-mental-health-188245?utm_medium

[6] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-12-birth-to-thirty-a-study-of-the-children-born-in-1990-the-first-t

[7] https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/mental-health-for-all-not-a-reality-in-sa?utm_source=Politicsweb+Daily+Headli

[8] https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/mental-health-for-all-not-a-reality-in-sa?utm_source=Politicsweb+Daily+Headli

[9] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6181118/ and https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-11-openness-and-connection-are-the

[10] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-06-06-divided-we-tweet-a-flood-of-lies-this-way-comes-and-will-tear

[11] https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/mental-health-for-all-not-a-reality-in-

[12] https://www.news24.com/health24/mental-health/heres-how-can-you-get-access

[13] https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/mental-health-for-all-not-a-reality-in-

[14] Presentation by Ms Manoko Ratala 'Fostering Mental Health in the Context of a Failed State', Humanities Wellness Webinar, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 25th November 2022

[15] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-09-05-lets-not-beat-abou

[16] It seems that this increase has been particularly among older women. See 14 above

[17] https://mg.co.za/opinion/2021-10-05-suicide-crisis-soars-in-south-africa

[18] The South African Child Gauge is an annual publication complied by the Children's Institute of the University of Cape Town (UCT) that aims to report on and monitor the situation of children in South Africa, in particular the realisation of their rights. The theme of the report for 2022 focuses on child and adolescent mental health

[19] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-05-30-teen-mental-health-stigma-our-educa-tion-and-health-syst

[20] https://mg.co.za/news/2022-06-23-child-and-adolescent-mental-health-services-faci

[21] https://ewn.co.za/2022/06/03/one-in-five-sa-kids-have-a-mental-health-condition-o

[22] https://ewn.co.za/2022/06/03/one-in-five-sa-kids-have-a-mental-health-condition-o

[23] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-06-30-childrens-mental-health-and-the-digi

[24] https://theconversation.com/childrens-mental-health-and-the-digital-world-how-to-get-the-bal-ance-right-185047

[25] https://theconversation.com/childrens-mental-health-and-the-digital-world-how-to-get-the-bal-ance-right-185047

[26] https://theconversation.com/childrens-mental-health-and-the-digital-world-how-to-get-the-bal-ance-right-185047

[27] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-25-love-and-death-in-the-time-of-covid/?utm_source=TouchBasePr

[28] https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-10-11-helpless-anxious-and-depressed-how-eskom-blackouts-hit-ord

[29] 'Raids on the Unspeakable', Thomas Merton. (New York: New Directions, 1964), pp72-73