
Media Statement

Professional Board for Psychology talks mental health issues and amidst COVID-19

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For immediate release

Pretoria – The ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 is a global challenge that has resulted in significant morbidity and mortality worldwide. The pandemic has crippled the healthcare system and world economies, and this has resulted in the economic recession having negatively affected many people’s mental health status and created new barriers for people already suffering from mental illness.

The Professional Board for Psychology under the ambit of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) is concerned about the growing mental health challenges of the public and in particular, the demands and risks placed on its practitioners as a result of the pandemic. Our health care practitioners are working at the forefront and those practitioners who are working in hospital settings play a vital part in the management of the mental health challenges related to their colleagues as well as that of their patients.

Mental health is an important part of the overall health and wellbeing of individuals. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It may also affect how we handle stress situations, relate to others and make decisions on a day to day basis. In the words of António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, “Mental health is at the core of our humanity. It enables us to lead rich and fulfilling lives and to participate in our communities” (13 May 2020).

Fear, anxiety, and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats and at times when people are faced with uncertainty or the unknown. Added to the fear of contracting the virus are the significant changes to our daily lives, including the restriction of movement in efforts to curb and slow down the spread of the virus. Faced with the new realities of working from home, temporary or permanent unemployment, home-schooling of children, and lack of physical contact with other family members, friends and colleagues, it is therefore normal and understandable that people are experiencing fear in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are also dealing with grief at the loss of a loved ones. As the pandemic continues “COVID burnout” is also emerging. It is thus important to take care of our mental

as well as our physical health as “Good mental health is absolutely fundamental to the overall health and well-being” (Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO), October 2020).

The WHO conducted a survey in 2020 among 130 countries across WHO’s six regions. It evaluated how the provision of mental, neurological and substance use services had changed due to COVID-19, the types of services that have been disrupted, and how countries were adapting to overcome these challenges.

Countries reported widespread disruption of many kinds of critical mental health services:

- Over 60% reported disruptions to mental health services for vulnerable people, including children and adolescents (72%), older adults (70%), and women requiring antenatal or postnatal services (61%).
- 67% saw disruptions to counseling and psychotherapy; 65% to critical harm reduction services; and 45% to opioid agonist maintenance treatment for opioid dependence.

Several people have been experiencing work and employment-related stress due to the disruptions in routine and economic activity caused by the pandemic and are aware of their increased stress levels, as most struggle to find a healthy coping mechanism.

The Board would like to educate, create awareness and encourage the public at large on the importance of taking care of their mental health and how to deal with mental health challenges during this traumatic period.

Obsessions and Compulsions

Obsessions are intrusive thoughts, images and impulses that cause anxiety or distress, while compulsions are the mental or behavioural effort to cancel, correct, counteract or atone for the obsession. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is a problem where obsessions and resulting compulsions start to interfere with your social and occupational functioning. One common type of obsessive-compulsive disorder is to do with the obsessional fear of contamination and the compulsive need to wash your hands.

Depression

Social withdrawal and reduced activities are two of a number of factors that can exacerbate and maintain a depressed mood. We have already discussed how important it is that you maintain your social contact with others as far as possible, without putting yourself or anybody else at risk. This means that we should use smartphones and digital technologies to send and receive messages, to see each other and to speak with each other.

Suicide

It is not uncommon to have thoughts of killing yourself when you are depressed or have some other psychological problem. While this is obviously very distressing, it is not a psychiatric emergency unless these thoughts develop into concrete plans to end your life. Research shows that many people who

survive an attempt at suicide or who are prevented from killing themselves, are often relieved to have survived and do not necessarily experience further thoughts of killing themselves.

Trauma

The coronavirus pandemic will be traumatic for some people. Health practitioners are probably most at risk, but others might be exposed to the traumatic events to do with the pandemic.

The Board wishes to remind South Africans of the need to be vigilant for symptoms of serious mental health issues, which could include sleeping disorders, irritability, depression, anxiety or substance/alcohol abuse amongst others.

Should you experience or know of anyone experiencing the above-mentioned symptoms, please contact your health care professional immediately or contact a non-profit mental health support advocacy organisation such as:

The SA Federation for Mental Health (SAFMH): Hotline at 0800 029 999

The SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG): Telephone number 011 234 4837.

COVID-19 Corona Virus South African Resource Portal: www.sacoronavirus.co.za

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About the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA)

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) also known as Council is a statutory body established under the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974. The HPCSA is committed to protecting the public and guiding the professions. The mission of the HPCSA is quality and equitable healthcare for all. The HPCSA is mandated to regulate the health professions in the country in aspects pertaining to education, training and registration, professional conduct, and ethical behaviour, ensuring Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and fostering compliance with healthcare standards.

In order to safeguard the public and guiding the professions, registration in terms of the Act is a prerequisite for practising any of the health professions registrable with Council.

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