

# Societal influences affect youngsters' mental health

A culture of crime and violence, peer pressure and the alarming rates of substance abuse has an adverse effect on the mental and emotional state of many young people in South Africa.



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Mental illness among young in South Africans does exist, however, socioeconomic and other pressures are increasing the rate of depression and suicide in particular. Also of great concern is the high level of substance abuse which is becoming a huge problem in South Africa, even reaching crisis levels, all of which negatively impact the mental health of our youth, says specialist psychiatrist, Dr Soobiah Moodley.

To illustrate the effect drugs are having, in two separate incidence, young men from privileged backgrounds – both allegedly addicts - have been arrested on suspicion of murdering family members.

## Peer pressure and violent homes

In addition, peer pressure may not only have a detrimental effect on children's mental state of mind, it plays a significant role in increasing the number of youth experimenting with substances and hence increasing their susceptibility to mental health problems and impacting negatively on them academically, says Dr Moodley.

To make matters worse, substance abuse in a family home have been known to frequently replicate in children. "Exposure to childhood violence, including witnessing violence in the home, is consistently found to be associated with aggressive behaviour later in life, particularly rape and intimate partner. In contrast, secure attachment and social support can enhance children's resilience and ability to cope with adverse traumatic experiences," according to the [2014 South African Child Gauge](#).

The report also confirms that violence against children in South Africa has major psycho-social and health consequences: "The impact of violence goes beyond the physical injuries and visible scars, and evidence has shown lasting emotional and social consequences. Abuse and neglect in early childhood affect brain development and impact on cognitive and psycho-social adjustment, resulting in an increased risk of violent and anti-social behaviour."

## Growing cause of disability

Mental illness rates among the 10 major causes of disability in the world. By the year 2020 it is projected that mental illness will be the number one cause of disability, according to World Bank figures, and it appears that this projection is well on track, he adds.

Likewise, there is also a high degree of continuity between psychiatric disorders in childhood and adolescence and those in adulthood. Some 75% of adults with mental health problems experience the first onset before the age of 24 years, according to the [Mental health and risk behavior report](#).

## **Appropriate treatment**

But all is not doom and gloom, stresses Dr Moodley. “There is a definite need to understand that mental illness is a medical illness, much like high blood pressure, diabetes or heart disease, and that most mental ailments are treatable with medicine and psychotherapy, and by addressing appropriate social factors.

“Some people have a mistaken belief that they should never use medication such as antidepressants, but psychopharmacological treatment in conjunction with psychological counselling and therapy, is an important and necessary part of treatment. Psychotherapeutically, a good therapist may be able to help you make more progress in changing your life than you would alone. Therapists have experience in helping people and you have the assurances of confidentiality,” he says.

If appropriately treated with medication and psychotherapy and social issues are satisfactorily addressed, success is inevitable. However, in a number of instances, non-compliance coupled with other external influences plays a negative role in terms of outcome, invariably resulting in relapse/readmissions, he adds.

## **Creating a safe and secure environment**

“Most importantly, interventions also need to address the economic and socio-cultural factors that continue to exacerbate mental health disorders in this country. Once the socioeconomic and living conditions of those in need improve and South Africans start working together to create a safe and secure environment for the greater good of the country and all of its citizens, everybody stands to benefit and prosper, also in terms of their mental well-being,” Dr Moodley stresses.

“While no individual is immune to mental illness, parental care, unconditional love and upbringing in a nurturing, caring environment can reduce the risk of mental disorders substantially. “Collectively our motto should be love, love and more love – this could go a long way in solving many of our general and mental healthcare problems,” he concludes.