



FOR PROFESSIONALS
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MENTAL HEALTH SHOULD BE A PRIORITY FOR ALL SOUTH AFRICANS – MENTAL ILLNESS AWARENESS MONTH

30 June 2015: According to statistics from the South African Federation for Mental Health, 23 South Africans die every day as a result of suicide, the 8th highest suicide rate in the world. In light of Mental Illness Awareness Month in July, it is critical for South Africans to be aware of this tendency in order to seek treatment sooner rather than later.

Dr Dominique Stott, Executive: Medical Standards and Services at PPS, says that it is typical for working professionals to experience extreme work pressures due to the huge responsibilities they may face in their daily routine. “This is largely exacerbated by high workloads and long working hours.”

She says that the accumulation of these burdens over a period of time may not only lead to physical health problems, but could also contribute towards mental and emotional issues such as depression and anxiety. “If these problems are not dealt with accordingly, the individual could be caught in an ongoing cycle of depression. This in turn could impact their ability to cope with their large workload, which could lead to further mental and behavioural issues.”

“In today’s society people are often pressured by family members and counterparts to live better, work harder and to earn more money. This type of pressure might set the person up for failure should they not be able to cope with the demands of a pressured and fast-paced lifestyle,” explains Stott.

To help avoid mental health problems it is important for every working individual to engage in adequate stress relief activities and not to take on too much at work.” In addition, Dr Stott advises everyone to take appropriate time away from work to spend with family, as this will improve their ability to continue work responsibilities upon their return. “After some time away, the individual will be more attentive to work, be able to sleep and concentrate better.”

She points out that it is not uncommon for most people to feel uncomfortable about seeking specialised advice on mental health issues. “These types of problems are often not dealt with until it is too late and the patient is too far down the line for an easy solution. It is important to remember that psychologists and psychiatrists are trained to assist patients with issues around work pressure, and it should not be seen as a sign of failure when someone seeks help for their mental issues.”

Counselling, medication or a combination of both treatments can assist most people to overcome mental health problems, says Dr Stott. “Should the depression cycle continue to worsen, however, the individual could experience further work impairments or even have to leave their profession altogether.”

Family members play a vital role in the early detection and management of mental health issues. Any family member who suspects a mental health issue in a relative should immediately try and get them to seek professional help. This might be a GP, a family counsellor or clinical psychologist. “The family must also ensure that the patient avoids turning to alcohol or other substance abuse to alleviate the symptoms of mental illness, as this will only increase their burden.”

In the majority of cases, the patient only requires a short time off work to allow for medication and counselling to resolve the symptoms, Dr Stott adds. “Only in the exceptional cases of more serious symptoms could the patient be required to take extended time off work.”

Should someone have a mental health history, it must always be declared when they are applying for insurance, she says. “It is vital that applicants always disclose these type of conditions. Even if the issue was considered to be stress-related, the process of risk assessment during underwriting will take all factors into consideration. This in turn will prevent claim repudiations should the problem recur in the future resulting in the patient being unable to work.”

“South Africans need to realise that mental illness can be cured with the right treatment. Gone are the days where mental health issues could not be discussed or managed successfully. Modern treatment allows most patients with a mental illness to lead a full and productive life,” concludes Dr Stott.