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According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), **mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realise his or her own potential; can cope with the normal stresses of life; can work productively and fruitfully; and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.** This means that mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders. A number of conditions are included in this definition, ranging from depression, anxiety, bipolar mood disorders, substance abuse, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, to schizophrenia and numerous other conditions.



## Questions

for Dr Thapelo Motshudi

Dr Thapelo Motshudi is a specialist in private practice. He is a consultant for NMG in the areas of Employee Wellness, Occupational Health and any other medical related topics.

### 1 What causes mental illnesses?

Anyone can suffer from mental illness, from small children to the elderly. There are many possible causes, and often multiple factors are responsible. In addition, one person can have more than multiple conditions at the same time. For example, abuse at home or discrimination at work can lead to alcohol or substance abuse, and this might also predispose one to major depression. Some specific psychological and personality factors can make one vulnerable to mental health problems, and genetic factors also play a role. Also, medical conditions like thyroid disease can also be the underlying cause of a mental health illness.

### 2 What are the symptoms?

Symptoms depend on the type of mental illness one has. Some can be easy to recognize, like schizophrenia and other types of psychosis. However, conditions like depression can be hard to detect for a non-professional, until they have progressed too far down the road. The early stages of depression, for example, or even bereavement, can easily be taken as normal when there is an obvious trigger, and it can be a very long while before people realise the abnormality.

### 3 What are some of the social issues around mental health?

A number of myths surround mental health. For example, people believe psychiatric disorders are not true medical illnesses, like cancer or diabetes, but rather that sufferers are just "crazy", lazy, or craving attention. Some think that depression results from a personality weakness or character flaw, and people who are depressed could just snap out of it if they tried hard enough. Following from these beliefs is that being treated for a psychiatric disorder means an individual has in some way "failed", or is weak. One other persistent myth is that depression and other illnesses, such as anxiety disorders, do not affect children or adolescents, and that children who suffer from these are spoilt and lack discipline. Occasionally people also ascribe mental illness to supernatural causes, suggesting it is punishment from some or other god. There is simply no evidence to support any of these claims.

### 4 How is the diagnosis made?

By definition, to become a 'disorder' a condition has to interfere with a person's functioning. We all feel depressed and "under the weather" at one point or the other, however once this feeling is prolonged and leads to problems at work or in social relationships, then this indicates a 'disorder' requiring intervention. Family members, colleagues, or friends, are critical in the diagnosis and management of these conditions. Look out for some of the following in your loved ones: new onset aggression; persistent sadness; increased and uncharacteristic alcohol or drug abuse; insomnia; suicidal thoughts and specific plans how to carry this out; excessive sleeping; loss of interest in personal appearance; and a persistent feeling of helplessness.

### 5 What is the treatment?

A lot of stigma surrounds mental illness. In the past people were ostracized and even sent away to live in isolation, far away from their communities and families, which only served to worsen their conditions because of the lack of social support. This practice still continues in many parts of the world even today. Mental disorders generally require a multi-disciplinary approach, and the team includes family members, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and employers if the individual is employed. Each condition is treated differently, and there is an array of treatment options, ranging from counseling to medication or both.

### 6 Mental health and the workplace

People with mental illness experience discrimination in their social and professional lives. Work is a major determinant of mental health and leads to social integration. To be excluded from the workforce creates material deprivation, erodes self-confidence, and creates a sense of isolation and marginalisation. For people with a serious mental disorder employment is an important stepping-stone to recovery. It improves self-esteem, increases financial security, provides opportunities to make friendships and obtain social support, and it enriches the quality of life. People with mental disorders who are unemployed and who lack meaningful social roles are in a position of double jeopardy. On the one hand, they are stigmatised because of their mental disorder (making it harder to gain competitive employment), and on the other hand they are also stigmatised for their lack of occupation. In the workplace, employees are encouraged to take advantage of Employee Assistance Programs to seek help timeously.

### 7 What are some prevention methods and what to do if worried?

Mental health promotion activities should start at a young age, therefore children should be provided with a stable environment that is sensitive to health; adequate nutritional needs; protection from threats; opportunities for early learning; and emotional support and positive stimulation. Social support for elderly populations and vulnerable people, including minorities, is key. Employers should institute stress prevention interventions at work through wellness programs, with early identification systems in place. By their very nature, mental illnesses make it hard for the affected person to ask for help, however if you are worried consider sharing your concerns with a close family member, colleague, or friend. Otherwise you can contact your local GP or health practitioner; health and wellness official at work or school; or use one of the many available free helplines.



## CONTACT

The South Africa and Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) on  
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