

Get to know the symptoms of general mental illnesses and recognise and acknowledge these in your life partner, a colleague, or friends, or a cousin, or a mother or a father. Or in yourself, writes *Lizette Rabe*.

October has always been the most beautiful month – in the words of Leipoldt, our “most beautiful, beautiful month” (*mooiste, mooiste maand*). It is spring, time for a new beginning. And now it has also officially become South Africa’s Mental Health Awareness Month – not only a month of new beginnings but now also a month of new hope for those living with mental illness.

For the first time ever, the national department of health this year declared October as awareness month – the fact that we have to break the silence and stigma from authorities’ side is an indication of how important it has become.

Yes, in conjunction with the World Health Organisation (WHO) we have always created awareness about the importance of mental health on 10 October. As a matter of fact, without a healthy functioning brain any health is out of the question.

The South African Federation for Mental Health (SAFMH) also used October to create awareness about mental health.

They specifically wanted to advocate the fact that creating awareness should be part of South Africa’s policy framework for mental health, and together with that, the so-called strategic action plan. Otherwise, all these fine-sounding frameworks and action plans will be meaningless, because without awareness creation ignorance will flourish, and stigma flourishes on ignorance.

The last few years, the department of social development also declared December as Awareness Month for Disability Rights, which included mental health.

But at the end of last year it was official announced in the *Government Gazette* that as from 2019, October would become South Africa’s Mental Health Awareness Month.

According to SAFMH, they are not sure why government did this and government spokespersons were also unable to give clear answers. But it is believed that this step follows the health ombudsman’s report about the Life Esidimeni tragedy that cost 143 people their lives.

And, says Bharti Patel, national executive director of SAFMH, there “certainly is a lot of pressure” on the department of health to prioritise mental health, because yes, there is a lot of pressure from all sides on us ordinary souls and our mental health.

### **Knowledge is power**

But what does creating awareness mean and what can you and I do during the awareness month? The answer is simple: Knowledge is power. And we can empower ourselves, firstly, by realising that mental health guarantees physical health.

Without the former one cannot function optimally. Therefore: Learn to recognise the symptoms of mental illnesses and accept that these are illnesses just like others, and they will not disappear by being ignored.

On the contrary, like other illnesses, they will only become worse.

The fact that October has now officially become our awareness month is also of importance as research has, ironically enough, shown that the risk of suicide increases during spring months.

Therefore: In the Southern Hemisphere we experience an increased occurrence of fatal depression episodes during our spring; in the Northern Hemisphere this happens during their spring – mainly in April and May.

You must therefore also make this October *your* month of new beginnings. Learn to recognise the symptoms of general mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety (see side box), and recognise and acknowledge these in your life partner, a colleague, a friend, a cousin, or a mother or father. Or in yourself.

A lot still has to be done to destigmatise mental illness, but we shouldn't think differently about these illnesses because they occur above our necks. As a matter of fact, we should pay more attention to it because our brain is our most important organ – the engine of our existence.

And by embracing hope you have taken the most important first step to cross the deep, dark abyss of mental illness, especially when it starts to become life threatening.

It is with good reason that the WHO has chosen suicide prevention as the theme of this year's awareness day on 10 October. Statistics indicate that too many people do not recognise the symptoms and this way the illness can escalate into a fatal phase.

### **Mental illness assumes gigantic proportions**

The objective of the WHO's theme is not only to educate the public about mental illness but also to help break the stigma created by ignorance – ignorance that too often leads to symptoms remaining undetected.

An American study has shown that depression among teenagers aged between 14 and 17 has increased by 60% from 2009 to 2017. In some instances, involuntary suicidal thoughts, called suicidal ideation, have more than doubled.

In May this year, during the US' Mental Health Awareness Month, former first lady and mental health champion Rosalyn Carter said we were standing on the brink of a worldwide mental health revolution, as mental illness was busy assuming crisis proportions.

The message is: Depression is a treatable illness and suicide is a preventable tragedy.

Research has shown that more than 90% of all suicides were caused by depression. When the illness has gone so far that involuntary suicidal thoughts that you cannot control start to develop in your brain, you urgently need to seek professional help.

If it had been any other disease, you would have been admitted to the high care unit of your nearest hospital.

Through awareness, we can empower ourselves against man's cruellest disease – a disease that has been called the silent prowler. Therefore: Make October the start of your new beginning. Break the silence, break the stigma.

If you recognise symptoms in yourself or in someone else, do something about it. And above all: Cling to hope. It *will* get better, because depression and related illnesses such as the different anxiety disorders are treatable – just as other biological diseases.

With the necessary professional psychological-therapeutic and psychiatric-medical assistance you will be able to take control of that black monster. You will be able to control it, not the other way around.

- **Sources:** bit.ly/gees1; [www.who.int](http://www.who.int); bit.ly/gees2
- **Rabe, who is attached to Stellenbosch University, established the Ithemba Foundation to create awareness and to support research.**
- The Hope Hike, a fun walk covering 3,5 or 10 km, and Hope Bike, a mountain bike trail over 25 km, will be held at Blaauwklippen Estate, Stellenbosch on 13 October and in the North at Van Gaalen's, Skeerpoort on 27 October. Depression is an illness, not a weakness – come and Walk for Hope.

<Kassie>

Symptoms and help

**Recognise the symptoms**

If you have been experiencing the following for more than two weeks, you are probably suffering from depression:

- Feeling sad, anxious or “empty”
- Struggling to concentrate, or to remember
- Being indecisive
- Feeling tired and without energy
- Feeling worthless, hopeless, negative, irritable and desperate
- Irritated and restless
- Finding nothing interesting anymore
- Cannot sleep, or sleeping poorly or too much sleep
- Eating too little or too much
- Have experienced involuntary suicidal thoughts

Please make an appointment with your general practitioner immediately.

**Help and information:**

Lifeline's 24-hour crisis line: 0861 322 322

Find a psychologist or psychiatrist in your area: [mentalhealth.org.za/mental-health-service-providers/](http://mentalhealth.org.za/mental-health-service-providers/)

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG): 0800 567 567 or SMS 31393