



■ OPINION

# SA youth's mental health crisis

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IT'S SOMETIMES hard to find words that can effectively address the mental health crisis we are facing as the youth of South Africa.

Much has been said and written about the state of mental health in our country, and young people have implored the state, private entities and communities to prioritise mental health, particularly that of the youth.

During this Mental Health Awareness Month, and in particular on World Mental Health Day on Thursday, I'd like to reflect on the experiences of many young people in South Africa today by relating something of my own struggle with mental illness.

Growing up in the small towns of Ladysmith and Dundee in KwaZulu-Natal, I was never educated about mental health. We were told that depression or anxiety were not real and legitimate illnesses, especially for black people.

Thus, for the longest time I believed that only a white person could suffer from depression or anxiety. The wheels turned in the middle of my matric year, when I simply broke down.

I remember this day like it was yesterday – can still see myself, crying uncontrollably in the secretary's office, softly whispering the words, "I can't do this anymore", repeatedly. I could not stop. I knew something was wrong with me, but I couldn't describe this overwhelming, heavy feeling I could not get rid of.

In hindsight, I've come to realise and understand that it was a culmination of post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from an assault I'd experienced a few weeks earlier, to the



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pressures of being a young leader at my school and quite frankly, an over-achiever in every aspect of my life, to the bullying I'd experienced from my peers because I was "different" to all the other boys.

My teachers quickly concluded that I was reacting to the assault and decided to call a local trauma counsellor to speak to me.

I recall to this day the counsellor approaching me, sitting down next to me and uttering the words: "You look fine, though". I laughed and reluctantly agreed with him.

What was I to say? I wasn't physically hurt. I wasn't crying anymore, and I'd taken a nap. How was I to know that my mental health was deteriorating? How was I to know that I was in a crisis? A while later I attempted to take my life, but how was I to know that I was in crisis?

It was only years later that I received professional assistance from the Centre for Student Counselling and Development at Stellenbosch University. Here I was, a young LLB student who many would describe as happy, energetic and

full of life, when in fact I was depressed and broken. I was lonely and yearned for recognition, but my anxiety made it impossible for me to open myself up to people.

My story is just one of many stories of young people living with different types of mental illnesses. Sadly, many young people are suffering and living in absolute darkness, mainly because they fear to seek help, or are incapable of it.

It's time for our government as well as public and private institutions, particularly tertiary institutions, to acknowledge that mental illness is killing the future of our beautiful country by tearing into the souls of the youth.

It's also time for parents, families and communities to educate, inform and empower themselves about this epidemic that continues to plague us, in order to provide support and assistance where and when it's needed.

In a 2018 study titled *Young People and Mental Health in a Changing World – Snapshots and Solutions*, the South African Federation for Mental Health highlights issues such as substance abuse, poverty, inequality and unemployment that affect the mental health of young people.

As we observe Mental Health Awareness Month and World Mental Health Day, I want to say to every young person living with a mental illness that I applaud your strength, your resilience and ability to occupy a body which is constantly at war with you. I plead with you to find an ounce of strength inside of you to get up and seek help.

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