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SUPPORT FOR MEN STRUGGLING WITH SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

High-profile suicides have put a normally hidden topic under the spotlight. What can be done to support men who may be suffering in silence?

In July 2018, people around the country were shocked to read that eminent University of Cape Town (UCT) Professor Bongani Mayosi had taken his own life. Professor Mayosi was the Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT, and he seemed to 'have it all': career, family and friends. Despite appearances, he suffered from crippling depression, according to his family.

'When someone in a dark space reads about the suicide of a high-profile person, they can see that they are not alone with their suicidal thoughts,' says Dr Tsepiso Mhlane, a specialist psychiatrist based at the Life Mental Health unit at [Life Riverfield Lodge](#) in Johannesburg.

RISING STRESS LEVELS

'Stress is a factor in suicide and there's no denying that life is more stressful in 2019, with our poor economy, family and work challenges, and rising unemployment and divorce rates,' says Dr Suntheren Pillay, a specialist psychiatrist based at the Life Mental Health facility at [Life St Joseph's](#) in Durban.

'Suicide statistics aren't really increasing, but the honest reporting of suicide is rising, giving the impression that more people are taking their own lives,' says Dr Pillay.

According to the 2012 Burden of Disease study (the most recent available) by the Medical Research Council (MRC), five times more men than women commit suicide every year in South Africa.



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The MRC study found that 14 South African men succeeded at suicide every day. That's 21 per 100,000 people, compared to four per 100,000 in the case of women.

'More women attempt suicide, whereas men are more likely to "successfully" kill themselves,' explains Dr Pillay. 'This is because women tend to choose slower-acting methods, such as overdosing on pills, and men choose more violent methods of suicide, such as shooting themselves.'

SPOT THE SIGNS

'Suicidality is very difficult to predict,' says Dr Mhlane. 'However, some things to worry about are changes in behaviour, such as becoming more withdrawn, less motivated and developing a negative perception of themselves and life.'

'Generally, somebody who is suicidal is not able to see anything positive in their life, despite the presence of many positive aspects,' says Dr Mhlane.

TALK ABOUT IT

'We need to destigmatise mental illness if we are going to curb suicide,' says Dr Pillay. 'A man may be more comfortable to talk about his cardiologist after having a heart attack, but less open about mentioning that he is seeing a psychiatrist as part of dealing with his depression,' says Dr Pillay. 'If someone you know talks about suicide or attempts suicide, they need help. You should tell them how brave they were to talk about it and get them to see a doctor and have a professional assessment. Never disregard threats of suicide and always seek assistance from a professional if you are concerned about a loved one or yourself.'

'We need to assess the person to establish what kind of treatment is needed, depending on the severity of their condition. Perhaps counselling or short-term in-hospital treatment is needed, or they may have an underlying problem such as depression or bipolar mood disorder. Millions of people who have attempted suicide have had help and are alive today because of it,' says Dr Pillay. 'Those who don't get help may die, those who do may live.'

5 WARNING SIGNS

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) identifies these warning signs of suicide. The person:

- Talks or makes jokes about suicide
- Seems to feel deeply depressed and mentions that life would be better if they were not alive
- Shows no interest in things that normally brought pleasure
- Shows sudden and drastic changes in their mood and may act out of character – like splurging all savings on elaborate holidays or buying very expensive gifts
- Begins preparing for death. 'For example, finalising their affairs and tidying their home and office,' adds Dr Pillay

The information is shared on condition that readers will make their own determination, including seeking advice from a professional. E&OE.



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