

# Let's talk therapy. Together we can break the stigma around mental health

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10 Oct 2019

*October is Mental Health Awareness Month, which means it's time to talk about a set of problems that afflict everyone in our society. Shifting the way we discuss emotional distress is an important first step towards healing as a nation.*



Everyone in South Africa has a story about mental health. It might not be your own experience – it could be a friend, family member, or co-worker. But we all have a connection to someone who has experienced mental health problems. Mental illnesses and disorders are deep and pervasive problems that afflict millions of South Africans – most of who suffer in silence. Which is why we need to take mental health seriously.

As a society, we must learn from the people who are brave enough to be vocal about their experiences. Collectively, we need to nurture the ability to talk about emotional distress – in all its forms – and make it easier for people who are struggling to seek and receive treatment. Because the numbers are alarming: [at least 30%](#) of South Africans have suffered from some form of mental disorder in their lifetimes. Yet it's still taboo to talk about mental health. [Only one in six employees](#) with mental illness felt comfortable disclosing their condition to their employers. Undoing this stigma is the first step towards solving this national crisis.



## Complex causes, imperfect treatments

Why are mental health problems so prevalent in South Africa today? It's hard to argue that the cause doesn't lie with our history. The divisions of the past are still with us today. Add to that [rising rates of violent crime](#), increasing economic and political instability, and the [constant disruption and pressure](#) of social media and digital devices, and it's no wonder South Africans are struggling: we're constantly primed to respond to crisis.

So how do you treat a nation of people dealing with deep psychological trauma? There isn't a quick fix for our collective wounds, but if our society becomes more accepting, more nurturing and caring in its approach to emotional distress, we can make it easier for people who suffer to speak about what they are experiencing.

## A national imperative

Mental health problems aren't like catching a cold or breaking a bone – there's often no clearly identifiable cause, and time can make things worse rather than better. They're complex, which makes understanding and caring for emotional distress incredibly difficult. Treatments that work for some don't always work for all. The experiences of South Africans with mental health problems reflect this complexity – each person's story is slightly different. Fortunately, many of those who suffer have been courageous enough to use their experiences as a way to help others.

There's [Tshepang Mahlatsi](#), who struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder after confrontations with police during the #FeesMustFall protests. Part of Mahlatsi's difficulty was the stigma he faced. So he started Next Chapter, an organisation at the University of the Free State that aims to destigmatise speaking up about mental health.

Or [Braam Malherbe](#), the adventurer who once ran the entire length of the wall of China over 100 days. He has rowed from Cape Town to Rio de Janeiro, a distance of more than 8,000 kilometres. But the most admirable thing about Malherbe isn't his strength or his willpower. It's his willingness to share his battle with depression. After a tumultuous series of events that included his fiancé leaving him and his father dying from a stroke, Malherbe was on the brink. He resolved to take his own life in the Cederberg mountains. He didn't do it – something in the raw beauty and power of the wilderness stopped him – and he found his purpose, testing the limits of his physical endurance to raise awareness for important causes.

Malherbe's pursuit of physical challenges is echoed in the story of [Arthur Duncan](#), who took up cycling at the age of 65 to manage his depression – and found himself representing South Africa in his age-group category. For [Charleen Meiring](#) it was karate. The discipline helped her through depression, and she made it to the World Japan Karate Association Championships in Amsterdam in 2017 – where she took home two medals.

On a different note, [Yvette Hess](#) self-medicated with alcohol to manage her mental health problems – which include diagnoses of depression, bipolar, and anxiety disorder. She discovered art after being admitted to a psychiatric ward, and found that she could express and understand her emotions through painting. In a similar vein, [Bevin Reynolds](#) tried several years of talk therapy while living with bulimia and depression. It helped, but she needed more. Reynolds kept looking, and ultimately found healing in dance. She shared her story, and joined Dance Awake as a facilitator to help other people experience the benefits and joy of movement. Each of these people found a way to recognise what was wrong, and steered themselves towards stability. It might not be exercise, art, or dance – and often medication is a vital intervention – but finding peace starts with achieving some small sense of control.

## What can we control?

You don't have to have suffered from mental illness to make a contribution to this cause – you just need to be willing to listen and support the people in your life. As a society, we can't control whether or not people suffer from mental health problems. We can control how we talk about those problems, and we can work to break the destructive stigma that makes it so difficult for so many to seek help.

This doesn't mean that we should pressure everyone who has experienced mental health problems to speak up. It does mean that we should listen if someone chooses to open up, and offer support without judgement. Reynolds, Mahlatsi, and Malherbe were able to speak up and get help. By sharing their stories, and those of others like them, we can make it easier for more people to do the same.

Being strong and resilient doesn't mean never experiencing doubt or weakness. It means having the ability to weather distress, reach out if you have to, and accept help when it's offered. If we change the way we talk about mental health problems in South Africa, we can remove the barriers currently stopping people from speaking out. That's a goal worth fighting for.

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