

Panda for Teens - a safe space for youth to receive mental health support

The Panda team has launched 'Panda for Teens' in response to the increased need for mental-health support for young people.



Source: [Rxabay](#)

The Panda app provides a safe and anonymous space for teenagers aged 16 and above to find community-based and professional support, share their thoughts and feelings with those of a similar age, and access a wide range of mental health resources.

"All the existing features in the Panda app will also be available to teenagers, including a comprehensive library of mental health resources and the ability to schedule one-on-one sessions with a registered professional.

"They will have the added benefit of being able to attend and participate in Forest sessions dedicated to teen-specific issues," says Allan Sweidan, chief science officer of the Panda app.

'The Forest' is a virtual support platform within the app that is moderated by mental health professionals. In Forest sessions, Panda users can listen in and speak anonymously and freely about what they're going through. Forest sessions are live and are delivered in audio- and text-only format for teens, giving peace of mind to those who wish to remain anonymous while participating in sessions.

Stigma prevents teens from getting help

According to a 2021 Unicef South Africa poll, 65% of young people admitted to experiencing some form of mental health challenge but did not seek help for it. One in five respondents didn't know where to find help or didn't get appropriate help because they were worried about "what people would think".

“The shame attached to suicide is primarily why young people do not come forward to talk about the troubling thoughts they are experiencing until it is too late. Behind every suicidal thought, attempt and another form of self-harm is a cry for help,” says Mandisa Mtembu, a registered counsellor. “We need to normalise becoming aware of emotions and their impact from as early as primary school. These conversations need to happen at home, at school and on other platforms like Panda that are available to our youth and are safe to use.”



#BehindtheSelfie: Alon Lits, cofounder of Panda

Emily Stander 8 Dec 2022



In light of Teen Suicide Prevention Week, Mtembu hosted a Forest session on 12 February, which took place on the Panda app. The session, *What to do if a teenager you know is struggling with their mental health and how to communicate effectively with them*, was specifically aimed at helping young people, parents, guardians, and educators navigate how to deal with teens who show signs of suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

“Generally speaking, social media has become a very destructive force, with young people constantly being connected to their screens. Images of influencers and others seemingly living their best lives, the pressure to continually put on a happy and successful face, and the relentlessness of online bullying all contribute to high levels of acute stress in young people,” adds Sweidan. “This engenders a sense of hopelessness and futility, which many teens in South Africa deal with by turning to distractions such as drinking or using other mind-altering substances.”

Mental health support teens need and want

“We aim to have up to 12 teenagers per group session, enough to keep it interesting and engaging while also giving everyone a chance to have their say,” says Sweidan. “The sessions will focus on a variety of issues that they have identified as important and relevant to them including sessions on depression, anxiety, and peer pressure.

“Our teenager users, like all Panda users, will also have the opportunity to suggest session topics that they would like to be part of. They can also download videos and read articles, do assessments, and get other forms of support for any of their mental health issues.”

Panda for Teens can be accessed by downloading the free Panda app from the Apple App Store, Google Play and the Huawei App Gallery.

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