

## EDITORIAL

# Challenges affecting Psychologists today

**P** sychologists have always faced many challenges. Often we have to justify the legitimacy of the field amidst other Healthcare Professionals. Universities themselves have difficulty with placing Psychology. The field integrates knowledge from many areas. Hence it's often difficult to decide whether the discipline should be located in the Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Commerce or Education. Psychology by virtue of its relationship with the mind-behaviour environment interaction influences every aspect of life. Psychology, no matter where it's housed, is most concerned with the promotion of Mental Health and well-being and the prevention and management of mental ill health. As such Psychologists in South Africa register with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and are recognised to be specialists in Mental Health Care. Despite this, Psychology and Psychologists still face the age old challenges that stem from

fearing the unknown, stigmatising difference and understanding medicine to be associated solely with healing.

It's human nature to be anxious about things you don't know or can't see. Since difficulties with Mental Health are often difficult to see or explain, individuals shy away from talking about them or seeking help. This means symptoms get worse and it's only once they become really disruptive to a person's life that help is sought. Many people are unaware of the symptoms and tend to report only the physical symptoms like feeling tired or having aches and pains in the body and not being able to get to work. Quite often GP's are the first point of call. This is absolutely normal and expected. Sometimes the GP doesn't pick up on the underlying problem and treats only the physical symptoms, often resulting in a few GP visits before a diagnosis is made. At that point the person is referred to a Psychologist. Hence the first



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challenge experienced by many Psychologists is that of only being able to see a client after the problem has persisted for some time which means that treating the problem might take longer.

An even bigger challenge is that of the Stigma linked to Mental Health and Illness. Even after a referral or even if one realises the need for some counseling, individuals are

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hesitant to pursue this route. A number of cultures have various myths about those who may be struggling with a Psychological problem. These often have far reaching consequences for the individual and their family like being shunned in the community. So people feel the need to deny or hide the problem. Even a visit to a Psychologist is stigmatised.

More recently though and through the work of organisations like SADAG, many communities and individuals have become more understanding of Mental Health challenges. This Stigma is decreasing particularly in urban areas and it's encouraging to note that many more people are approaching Psychologists earlier. There are also many more Support Groups in communities. Telephonic and online support is also available.

The majority of South Africans understand a visit to a healthcare professional involves a discussion of symptoms and a prescription of medication. Since Psychology doesn't involve an exchange of something tangible – like a prescription and medicine – it's often difficult for people to understand the value of

therapy. Often at least three to four sessions are required before a definite diagnosis and sometimes before a difference is seen. Hence another challenge Psychologists face is explaining to clients that therapy is different. It might take a bit longer to see a difference but the effects are more long lasting.

The time required for Therapy as well as the smaller numbers of registered Psychologists in South Africa leads to what be amongst the biggest challenges for Psychology in South Africa – that is increasing access to a Psychologist. Both in public and private practice, demand exceeds supply. Government is also yet to respond adequately to the Mental Health needs of South Africans. The recent Life Esidemeni tragedy has highlighted the current inadequacies in the National Health System with regards to mental health. It's necessary for more mental healthcare professionals to be employed in the public service to ensure enough people get the care they require for Mental Health difficulties. Psychologists and Psychiatrists together with organisations like the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) and the South African Society for

Psychiatrists (SASOP) together with SADAG have been lobbying for this for years.

It's encouraging to note that the Government was progressive in developing the National Mental Health Care Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013-2020. However, we still have a long way to go in implementing the policy. Another challenge is how to engage Government on issues of social justice and ultimately ensuring the majority of our population receives the Mental Health benefits offered by Psychology.

Also on a positive note is the recent work on decolonisation and the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems as beneficial to health and wellbeing. This allows for greater collaboration between communities and healthcare professionals with positive outcomes for Mental Health. It was Madiba who said, 'Human beings regard their mental capacity as the most defining feature of themselves as a species. To respond in a caring manner to the impairment of those capacities in others is to really know ourselves as human beings and to live out our humanness.' Let us all work together to improve the Mental Health and wellbeing of South Africans. No Health without Mental Health! **MHM**