

SA students are facing a mental health crisis

Issued by [Vega School](#)

10 Jul 2019

From dealing with the stress of exams to coping with the anxiety of building a successful future, students tend to have a lot on their plates. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group ([SADAG](#)), one in four university students are likely to be diagnosed with depression, and 20% of students admit to having had suicidal thoughts at some point in their tertiary studies.



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With these alarming stats in mind, it's clear that SA students are in dire need of support in dealing with stress and anxiety. Shevon Lurie, Managing Director at Vega (a brand of the Independent Institute of Education – [The IIE](#)) says that higher education institutions should place greater emphasis on mental health and wellness, adding that a full-time social worker or counsellor is a must on every campus.

"Students carry incredibly heavy loads of stress and unrealistic expectation on their shoulders, especially during exam time. Those loads only get heavier as they progress through their studies and feelings of anxiety about their career and future start to creep in," says Lurie.

Lurie says that there is a dedicated Wellness Navigator on each of Vega's four campuses, who is responsible for helping students with their psychological needs while they are completing their studies at Vega. Students can also book one-on-one wellness sessions, covering everything from time management skills to academic support.

"I think that the stress of living in such a digitally driven world needs to be countered by humanness," says Leigh Haselau, Campus Wellness Navigator at Vega. "Our goal is to create a culture of acceptance and non-judgement on campus so that students and staff feel comfortable to seek out counselling and support."

During peak stress periods, the school also runs workshops and wellness days aimed at interacting with students and making sure their time is balanced between studying, socialising and rest. Staff are also offered wellness support and counselling.





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i am bipolar but i am
not crazy.



[click to enlarge](#)

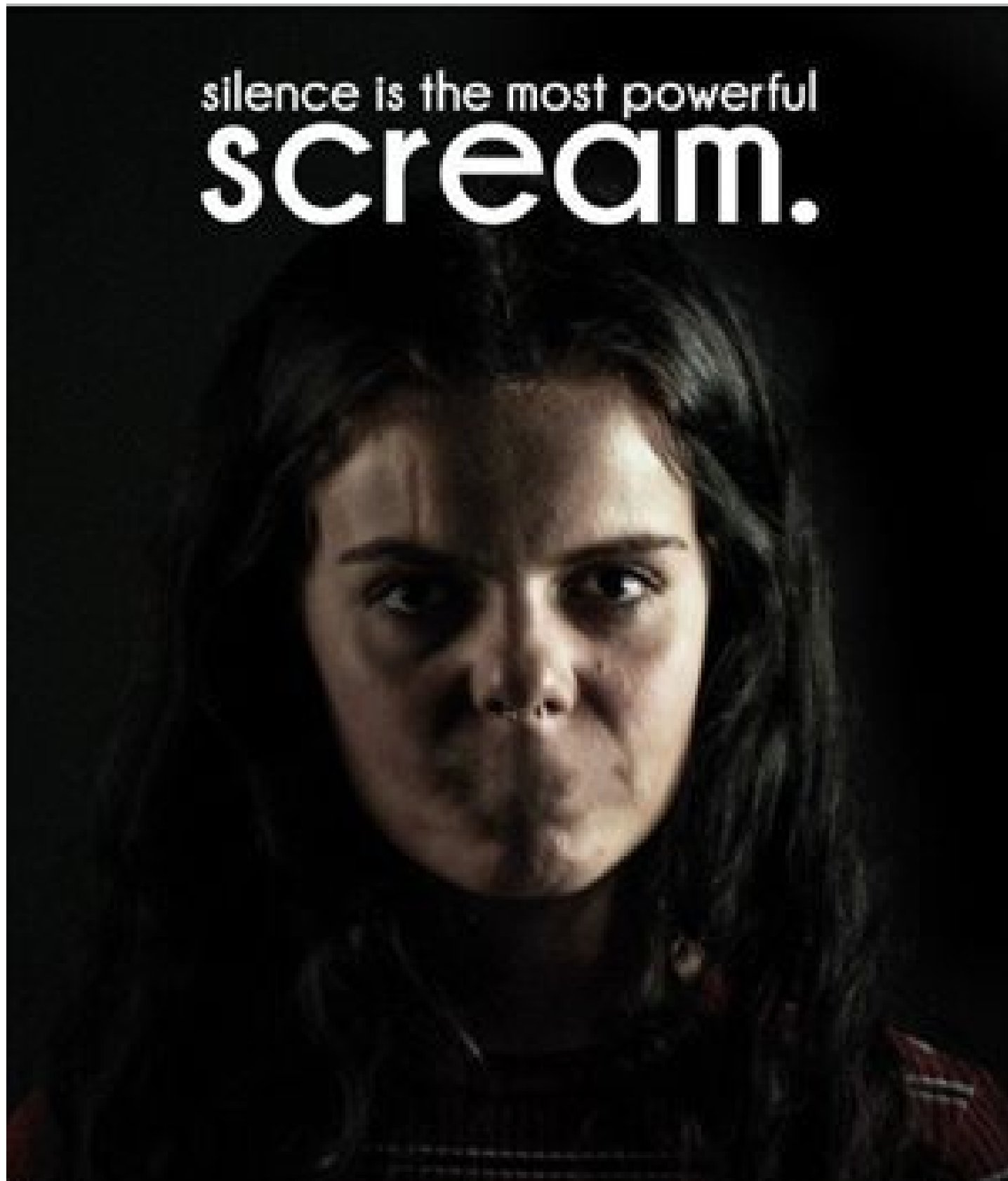
According to Haselau, “students benefit from being navigated by people who feel emotionally supported and who work in a healthy staff culture. In any organisation, when staff feel valued and supported, they are more motivated to look after the organisation’s customer base.”

Creating an environment that is conducive to learning is also key. Haselau adds that one of the aspects of studying at Vega that most appealed to people is the campus, particularly the ‘Big Slide’, a prominent feature on the Johannesburg campus, and the ‘chill areas’ like the outside rooftop deck on the Cape Town campus where students can go for fresh air and great views of the city.

Engaging with the bigger issues

Students at Vega are no strangers to producing work that deals with important issues surrounding social awareness, and this type of work often forms part of the curriculum. For example, Marius Du Toit, a second year graphic design student at Vega, recently won an International Creative Conscience Award for a [campaign project](#) he submitted on mental health.

His campaign features a series of posters, each dedicated to the experiences associated with specific mental disorders, ending with the tagline, 'help defeat mental illness'. Not only did this gain international recognition for Du Toit and his work, but also shed light on an important subject.



A person wearing a dark, textured sweater is shown from the chest up. The background is dark and out of focus. The text is overlaid in white, sans-serif font.

you don't have to fight depression alone.
help defeat mental illness.

[click to enlarge](#)

A close-up, low-angle shot of a person's bare torso. The person's hand is visible on the left side, resting on their hip. The lighting is soft and focused on the midsection, with the background being dark.

no food will hurt me as much as
my eating disorder.



[click to enlarge](#)

Two other students at Vega – Raphael Kuppasamy and Jenny Groenewald – also earned praise for their social awareness project, '[Earn Your Stripes](#)', which won the Special Honours Best Digital Student Award at the Bookmarks 2019. The campaign, designed for Adidas, encourages millennials to volunteer by offering them discounts on Adidas apparel for volunteering at nearby sports and non-sports-based organisations.

“In any higher education institution, the biggest priority should be helping students to find their purpose in the world. That, to me, entails building programmes and initiatives into the curriculum that encourage students to engage with the issues that face the world, so that they can one day become citizens who make a meaningful impact and bring positive change to their fields,” says Lurie.

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