

Registered counsellors can help stem the tide of SA's mental health crisis

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With endemic poverty, high unemployment, high crime rates and the prevalence of gender-based violence, South Africans have long been a chronically stressed nation. Over the past few years, the global pandemic, economic downturn, climate crisis and geopolitical wars have only served to highlight the need to properly recognise the impact of poor, and worsening mental health on the country.



There's never been nearly enough investment in mental healthcare in South Africa, despite the huge burden of costs as a result of high rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse and many other mental illnesses. With the growing awareness that this must be attended to, there are opportunities for creating a robust mental healthcare workforce that can help to provide essential services, not just in clinics, hospitals, and private practice, but right in communities, schools, universities, and workplaces.

Dr Jaclyn Lotter, Academic dean at [Sacap](#) (the South African College of Applied Psychology) says: "There is probably no area with a greater need for innovation than South Africa's mental health landscape. It's important, but not enough to train and deploy more psychologists and psychiatrists. There's widespread agreement that there needs to be focus on developing registered counsellors who can operate as frontline mental healthcare workers. Their primary role is to make psychological services accessible, by providing psychological and preventative interventions that focus on enhancement of psychological and social wellbeing in diverse contexts. Innovative models of mental healthcare delivery are also emerging to improve access to services. We're seeing exciting developments in harnessing technology, with registered counsellors involved in offering their services through app and tele-health platforms."

Across the country, South Africa has a dire shortage of mental health professionals. It is estimated that one in three South Africans experience mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Only one in ten of those living with mental health illness will successfully access mental healthcare. Access to psychologists in state hospitals is severely limited, especially in rural provinces such as the Eastern Cape where two psychologists are allocated for more than six million people. This means that most interventions in the national healthcare system may only happen when a person is completely overwhelmed by a mental health condition, and from then on, often need recurring care.

Vikki Botes, head of Faculty: Applied Psychology at Sacap says: “Registered counsellors have the potential to take the pressure off the state mental healthcare professionals, and they also play a preventative role. Numerous studies have shown that people who get help early respond better to treatments and are more capable of sustaining their mental health independently over the long term. This is especially true for young people where mental health support at the onset of a crisis can help to reduce suicide ideation, prevent self-harm, divert them from substance abuse, and improve school attendance and performance. The work of a registered counsellor can be both lifesaving and life changing.”

Sacap is one of few higher education institutions in South Africa which is training registered counsellors. Graduates of [Sacap's Bachelor of Psychology](#) (BPsych) degree are qualified to perform psychological screening, basic assessment, and psychological interventions. They have the skills to provide preventative and developmental counselling services and deliver psycho-education on a range of topics. This NQF 8 qualification is CHE-accredited and approved by HPCSA (Health Professions Council of South Africa). The 4-year, full-time BPsych education programme is available at Sacap's Cape Town and Johannesburg campuses.

“This is an ideal programme for people who have an interest in social transformation and a concern for the mental healthcare needs of South Africans. With the focus on mental health and well-being increasing, and with technology opening up innovative ways for delivering mental healthcare services, we see registered counsellors playing an increasingly prominent mental healthcare role in our society,” Dr Lotter concludes.

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