

# Bonitas offers Panda app for mental health

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One in six South Africans suffers from anxiety, depression or substance use disorder. Over the last two years the prevalence of anxiety and depression disorders has increased by 36.4% and 38.7% respectively.



Globally, over 970 million people have a mental health or substance abuse disorder. A study by the Global Happiness Council (GHC) shows that mental illness is the main ailment among people of working age.

Dr Morgan Mkhathshwa, clinical executive at Bonitas Medical Fund says: "This has a massive effect on employers as they try to cope with keeping their businesses going, preventing job losses and maintaining a happy and motivated workforce. The economic uncertainty, political instability and poor socio-economic conditions in South Africa have also added to the burden of mental health issues in South Africa."

To make matters worse, according to South Africa's National Mental Health Policy Framework, 'up to 80% of South Africans who need mental health support are unable to easily access it'.

In addition to a comprehensive mental health programme, Bonitas is the first medical aid to offer Panda to its members. 'The Panda app serves as a triage system for people with psycho-social issues. Users sign in anonymously and almost all the care they receive on the app is anonymised, meaning there is significantly less fear of stigma or being identified by peers.'

It's a free mental health and wellness mobile app that provides scientifically validated assessment tools to enable users to objectively measure their mental wellbeing. A gamified tracking tool allows you to document and monitor the progress you're making on your personal mental health journey. This includes:

- Engaging in interactive, audio-only sessions with peers and mental health experts in the 'Bamboo Forest'
- Learning new skills through assignments and videos to help you live a more fulfilled life
- Tracking your mental health progress to measure how you are feeling

- Getting text-based chat support from an accredited wellness counsellor
- Booking 1:1 virtual consultation with accredited and registered counsellors, social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals.

"The level of support depends on the degree to which you need help," says Mkhathshwa. "This ranges from level one, where there is an easy access point to community, information and support, through to level five where Panda will notify you to contact emergency services. We know how tough it can be to go through difficult times all by yourself but, with Panda, you will be able to find the support and resources that you need."

## **What is mental illness?**

Mental illness is defined as 'any behavioural or mental pattern that causes significant distress or impairs normal functioning'. It can occur as a once off, be persistent, or recur.

## **It is a medical condition**

It is a recognised medical condition in the same way as chronic diseases, such as diabetes and high blood pressure and can affect anyone. It is not a sign of weakness. The good news is, it's a condition that that can be managed and treated successfully.

Anxiety disorders and depression are the most common mental health problems but others include eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), bipolar mood disorder, as well as psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia and personality disorders. Substance abuse, such as drugs and alcohol, is also classified under mental illness.

## **Battling the stigma**

Mkhathshwa says: "Fortunately, increasingly well-known and influential people who are suffering from or have overcome mental illness, are being more open about it. This will go a long way to debunk myths, negativity, discrimination and judgement."

## **Help is at hand**

There are specialised mental health programmes in place through most medical aids and most mental illnesses can be effectively treated by health professionals and community-based services or NGOs. This may include access to medication, therapy and counselling.

The Mental Health Programme (MHP) from Bonitas, part of its Managed Care initiative, is aimed at improving quality of life and empowering people with mental health issues to manage their condition. It is education driven and offers support and resources to get the right care at the right time for a healthy mind, including loved ones. "The introduction of Panda dovetails neatly with our MHP," says Mkhathshwa.

"Mental illness cannot be wished away," says Mkhathshwa. "We can't expect someone to 'pull themselves together'. They simply can't. But with the right support and help, symptoms can be relieved and the recovery rate is encouraging with patients getting back to being happier, more productive members of society."

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