

Digital health: The new currency of happiness in South Africa

Happiness is not just a feeling; it is a state of well-being that everyone deserves, and access to healthcare – a constitutional right – plays an important role in this, says Tania Joffe, chief executive officer of Unu Health.



Source: Tania Joffe, chief executive officer of Unu Health.

In South Africa, where the beauty of a rich culture often contrasts sharply with socio-economic challenges, the path to happiness is invariably intertwined with health.

“The healthcare landscape in South Africa is a patchwork of contrast and disparity, says Joffe. “A staggering 5.5 million people in formal employment are without medical aid, burdening the public healthcare system, affecting employee wellbeing, and hindering economic productivity.”

The impact is palpable: when illness strikes, a day's work is lost as people journey, sometimes across multiple taxis, to overcrowded clinics where long waits for consultations and medications are the norm. This scenario drains personal health resources and diminishes happiness as the toll on physical and mental wellbeing mounts.

Few people know how intimately the two are connected. Researchers have found that greater wellbeing is directly linked to better general health, less pain, reduced susceptibility to colds and flu viruses, and fewer chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

It boils down to the fact that when people feel good, they are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours such as exercising and eating well, and, over time, these healthy habits promote health and help minimise disease. This benefits not only the individual but society as a whole.

Lows to resilient recovery

According to a recent Bureau of Market Research study, happiness levels in South Africa plummeted in 2022, hitting record lows. Among other factors, this was due to the persistent effects of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as various political, economic and social challenges.

In particular, discontentment concerning the economic and political environment surged. However, by 2023, the country's remarkable resilience saw it inching back to 85th position in the World Happiness Report from a lower 91st position the year before. Despite grappling with energy crises, soaring fuel costs, pandemic-induced financial burdens and inflation, there were signs of progress.

There is also a beam of hope in the burgeoning field of digital healthcare through platforms like Unu Health. This innovative avenue highlights the transformative potential of digital healthcare, revolutionising access to healthcare services.

Empowering healthcare

In South Africa, health services and technology integration have seen a significant push with the widespread use of smartphones. As of January 2023, it's estimated that between 20 million and 22 million South Africans are using smartphones. This broad adoption provides a foundation for digital healthcare initiatives.

With a smartphone, individuals can now schedule primary consultations with qualified nurses, leveraging technology for rapid assessments of health vitals via face scans.



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These scans – referred to as health checks - can measure heart rate, blood pressure, and glucose levels, which can inform the consultation with the nurse. If more comprehensive care is needed, the nurse may facilitate a referral for a digital or in-person consultation with a doctor.

This innovative shift in access to healthcare professionals is not just improving health outcomes; it's contributing to the nation's happiness quotient, making health and wellness a currency that everyone can afford.

“Digital healthcare tools are transforming the accessibility and convenience of health services in South Africa. There is profound power in taking control of one's health outcomes.

“We can start visualising a future where, with the right interventions, South Africa can ascend in the global happiness rankings. Getting healthcare right is a major step towards securing a happier, healthier society for all South Africans,” concludes Joffe.