



The toll of trauma

Description

Trauma is far more than just a difficult or shocking experience; it's an emotional response to overwhelming events that exceed our ability to cope.

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World Trauma Day (17 October) shines a light on trauma in all its forms, and especially how it affects our mental health.

In South Africa, trauma exposure is alarmingly common, with approximately 75% of the population experiencing at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, according to a research study in KwaZulu-Natal in 2024. When traumatic experiences overwhelm our normal coping mechanisms, they can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which affects about 2,3% of South Africans.

Trauma extends beyond violence and crime, and can stem from unexpected sources.

- The emotional wounds from **systemic discrimination and oppression during apartheid** are passed down from one generation to the next, manifesting in mental health issues, socio-economic challenges, and community dynamics.
- **Extreme poverty** – with its constant battle for food and shelter, lack of access to help, and feelings of hopelessness – creates chronic trauma and affects brain function, which in turn has a profound impact on mental wellbeing.

This collective trauma has contributed to South Africa's significant mental health burden, with up to 25% of the population affected by conditions such as depression and anxiety.

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Five ways to cope with trauma

Being more aware of what might cause trauma and reacting with compassion can create safe spaces for all trauma survivors.

How trauma shows up



**Intrusive
memories**



**Avoidance
behaviours**



**Negative
mood changes**

Five tips to help you cope

Acknowledge your experience:

Your feelings are valid, regardless of how

Category

1. Our Wellness

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