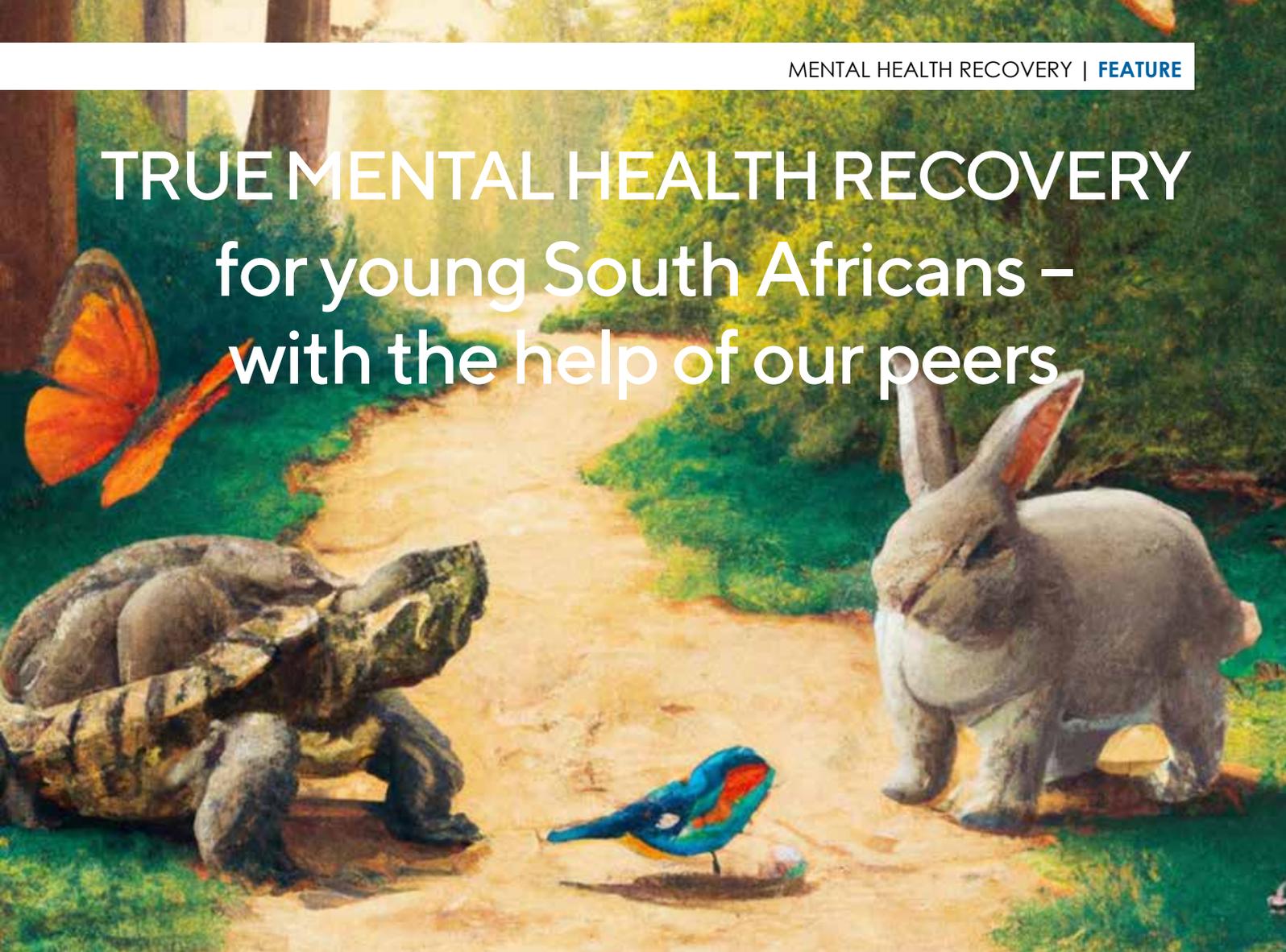


TRUE MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY for young South Africans – with the help of our peers



In Aesop's fable, The Tortoise and the Hare, each character tries to overcome their personal challenges alone. A recovery approach to mental healthcare can help us face these challenges together and, in the Beatles' famous words, "get by with a little help from our friends."

Mental health is not mental illness

In a developing South Africa, a country rich in culture and in recovery from a painful past, mental health challenges can hamper the healing and upward progression of the youth. Mental health conditions (MHCs) like depression, anxiety and suicide are on the rise globally and affect people of all races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. With the age of onset of most mental health diagnoses being in adolescence and early adulthood, and with nearly half of South Africa's population being under the age of 25, it is pivotal to educate our youth about the warning signs of declining mental health and to connect them to meaningful resources and supports.

Mental health IS health and mental health recovery IS possible. Our mental health affects the way we think and feel from day to day, the way we interact with people we care about, and our ability to do things that are meaningful to us. Signs of poor mental health range from experiences of feeling overwhelmed, prolonged sadness, anger, and irritability, decreased participation and productivity,

and strained relationships, to mental illness diagnoses like depression and anxiety disorders, addiction, eating disorders, and psychosis.

The stigma that exists towards people with symptoms of mental illness prevents people from accessing help when their mental health is declining and causes them to suffer in silence. Poor mental health does not necessarily mean mental illness but can result in mental illness without the appropriate support.

Public mental healthcare in South Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the strict stay-at-home lockdown in South Africa, resulted in increased levels of stress due to the trauma of loss, financial insecurity, social isolation, and intimate partner violence experienced.

Although South Africans reported struggling with their mental health, over 60% of young people did not seek help for mental health concerns. The pandemic also uncovered deficiencies within the system of mental healthcare in our country. In addition to poor help-seeking for mental health,

mental health conditions to resume and build their lives outside of the hospital setting.

The role of peer support work

In other countries around the world, recovery is becoming a standard way of care. The United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States of America, among others, focus strongly on functional, social, and psychological aspects of recovery and have incorporated these into their care systems. This has resulted in the emergence of a new carer role of peer support workers (PSWs) or peer specialists.

In addition to sharing lived experiences with service users (SUs), known as patients in the biomedical model, PSWs are also part of the communities that SUs live in and this gives them unique insight into the psychological, social, and cultural needs of people with MHCs.

Peer support work thus serves as a significant role within multidisciplinary teams that are more traditionally comprised of licensed psychiatric nurses, occupational therapists, social workers, and psychologists trained in Western approaches to mental health. Although peer support work still faces challenges, such as a lack of understanding of its place, role confusion, and stigma, it has been shown to improve SU self-stigma, involvement, empowerment, and leads to better outcomes overall.

Peer support workers (PSWs) have their own lived experiences with mental health challenges and play a meaningful role in multidisciplinary teams, helping to heal and empower people within their communities. We do not need to run our races alone, the path to recovery is possible with the help of our peers.

What could a recovery approach mean for South Africa?

The benefits of a focus on mental health recovery are numerous. It would mean a more balanced approach to the health of persons living with MHCs, and directly impact SU adherence to treatment, mental health episode relapse, and need for hospitalisation, which, in turn, would mean less costs in public mental healthcare.



A recovery approach should include the training of PSWs to work on multidisciplinary teams. PSW provides much needed job opportunities for service users and relieves the large burden of care that exists in LMICs. SUs are also more likely to trust and build rapport with PSWs, which improves help-seeking and helps address social and cultural barriers to care.

A recovery approach ultimately leaves people with mental health conditions feeling empowered by encouraging collaborative decision-making to achieve meaning, purpose, and hope in life. Recovery is the key to SUs living more satisfied lives, participating more actively in their communities, and, in turn, contributing to society as a whole.

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Mental Health Resources for Adolescents and Young Adults

Seek advice:

Mental Health and Young People – SA Federation for Mental Health

<https://www.safmh.org/mental-health-and-young-people/>

Find support:

South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)

https://www.sadag.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3118&Itemid=193

Get Involved:

Global Mental Health Peer Network

<https://www.gmhpn.org/membership.html>

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