

Counselling Hub boosts mental healthcare response during Covid-19 crisis

As South Africa's Covid-19 response shut down many options for access to mental healthcare services, Woodstock's Counselling Hub recognised the critical need to still be available to its low-income community. The Counselling Hub is an initiative of the SACAP Foundation, a non-profit organisation working towards providing accessible affordable mental health services, and the KK Educational Fund (KKEF).



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"The crisis fired up our entrepreneurial spirit," says Romi Kaplan, co-founder of the Counselling Hub. "We were determined not to separate our clients from their counsellors at such a stressful time, and so we managed to pivot, from the very first week of lockdown, to a tele-counselling service. The first week of March we had to call all the clients to inform them that we had to suspend face-to-face sessions and would be instilling an alternative to provide sessions to them via telephone and virtual platforms.

"It was important to work with our counsellors, to get their agreement and also ensure they were comfortable with working in this new way. We had to devise a system whereby counsellors would be able to recharge with airtime and data that we provided. We had to divert all calls from the main office to a cellphone at one of our houses. Immediately, we engaged an expert in tele-counselling to facilitate a training session via Zoom so that we could all master the basics of this new way of delivering mental health services.



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Transformation to donation-based platform

"Our model previously was to offer professional services at the affordable rate of R50 per session, but we needed to innovate here too as clients lost their sources of income. In some cases, the only way to ensure continuity of treatment has

been for our counsellors to make the calls. We have thus transformed to being [donation-based through our website](#).

"At this time of crisis, the importance of the Counselling Hub's work has been widely recognised and we are deeply grateful to the volunteer counsellors who have come on board and enabled us to actually grow our reach in Cape Town's vulnerable communities."

Every day at the Counselling Hub, more than 30 volunteer counsellors are delivering services through innovative tele-counselling to over 110 patients. Since its start up in 2019, the Counselling Hub has played an essential role in facilitating referrals to specific mental health services. The Covid-19 lockdown brought many mental health issues in the family context to light with parents becoming aware of their teens' eating disorders and adults reckoning for the first time with their substance issues or their lack of resilience when it comes to financial uncertainty.



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Counselling Hub takes ethos online

Says Counselling Hub co-ordinator Shifra Jacobson, "The Counselling Hub has effectively taken its ethos to enhance access to quality mental health services online because the continuity of mental health care services in South Africa should be a priority right now. Covid-19 has ramped up fear, uncertainty, depression, sadness and anxiety. As infections and deaths continue to rise, grief is going to become a challenge for many more people. As economic recession deepens and job losses increase, mental health issues are going to be paramount. We must find the innovative ways, not just to continue, but to amplify support and care."

For the founders of the Counselling Hub, Covid-19 is heightening their vision of a South Africa where there is universal, quality, affordable and well-developed mental health services.



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Boosting the wellbeing of South African society

Says Lance Katz from the SACAP Foundation, "The crisis intensifies the harsh realities that most South Africans experience. Never underestimate the benefits of a non-judgmental, listening ear. Basic mental healthcare tools are actually

highly effective in assisting clients in coping with daily challenges and can help them get through a highly traumatic event such as Covid-19. The Counselling Hub's tele-counselling services are providing friendly meeting points for clients who would otherwise be left in the lurch. Let's use Covid-19 to broaden access to mental healthcare and make sure that we boost the functional wellbeing of our South African society."

To support the Counselling Hub in its delivery of mental healthcare services during Covid-19, [click here](#).

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