

How can we support our youth's mental health struggles?

- Medshield

Issued by [Stone](#)

28 Jun 2023

According to the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#), approximately one in seven children aged 10 to 19 years are affected by mental disorders. The WHO's research indicates that up to 20% of children and adolescents globally experience mental health issues with depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders cited as the leading causes of illness, disability and even suicide among adolescents. South Africa has a significant shortage of public resources and funding for mental health services, particularly for children.



This general neglect and lack of investment in child mental health issues can result in untreated mental health problems persisting into adulthood, negatively impacting their well-being and productivity. Recognising the importance of addressing child mental health issues is crucial, and efforts should be made to improve mental health services for children in South Africa. Fortunately for some, private medical aid can help support our country's youth by granting them access to the care they need.

The risks facing children

Children face numerous risk factors that impact their mental health. Many often underestimate the pressure and stress faced by children and young adults. As they grow up, children and adolescents encounter various complex challenges stemming from significant life changes. Factors affecting their mental well-being include peer pressure, self-discovery, social media, disability, living conditions at home, violence (especially sexual violence and bullying), harsh parenting and South Africa's socio-economic climate.

Typical teenage life changes come with numerous choices that children may feel ill-equipped to make. Some may believe that mistakes made during their youth are irreversible – further impacting their mental health. Additionally, adolescents with mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination, stigma (which affects their readiness to seek help), educational difficulties, risk-taking behaviours, physical ill-health and human rights violations, as highlighted

in the WHO study.

Most parents or caregivers know that children rely on them for mental stability and that their behaviour impacts their children's mental health. This awareness is why so many parents strive to always be perfect. However, striving for perfection based on unrealistic standards portrayed on social media can also affect the parent's well-being, which in turn influences their children's behaviour.

The wonderful news is that children don't require their parents to be strong or perfect. Furthermore, a parent's mental health condition doesn't necessarily mean their children will have the same experience. What truly matters is how a condition is treated. Sometimes, children can manage their anxiety and sadness without professional assistance, while in other cases, they will need professional assistance. Disregarding a child's mental health will affect both the parent and the child. Seeking help and teaching children and adolescents healthy ways to respond to mental health issues, will be emotionally beneficial to both the parent and the child.

Parents must acknowledge the validity of their child's feelings. Even if one believes their child is merely 'seeking attention' or experiencing a mental health disorder, it is crucial to consult a child or youth psychiatrist upon noticing significant changes in their mood, attitude or behaviour. Understand that there is no shame in seeking the help of a psychiatrist for your child. A child psychiatrist is trained to address issues affecting thought processes and mental well-being. Most mental illnesses can be successfully treated through therapy and medication.

There are programmes that promote mental well-being and prevent mental health issues in adolescents. These programmes will teach them to regulate emotions, develop strategies to manage challenging situations and foster social support systems. To reach vulnerable children and teens, interventions need to employ a multifaceted approach including healthcare, adjustments to social settings, and participation from schools. It is important to avoid relying solely on medication as the only solution when intervening in child or adolescent mental health.

How Medshield Medical Scheme covers child mental health

Once registered on Medshield's Disease Management Programme, members can access generous Mental Health In- and Out-of-Hospital benefits, with all options adhering to Prescribed Minimum Benefit (PMB) treatment.

You don't have to handle your or your child's mental health disorder alone. There is a Medshield benefit option that suits your budget. With the additional support provided through the disease management programme, you can ensure that your child has a joyful childhood without the burden of mental health issues.

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