

#BeMoreVital



A YOUTH GUIDE TO MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

FOR YOUTH 15 - 29





TIP BOX



FEATURE BOX



ACTION BOX



PROMPT BOX



WHO WE ARE

bumb'INGOMSO – an isiXhosa phrase meaning “mould the future”
– is a multi-faceted HIV prevention project that supports
and empowers young people to fulfil their potential by
connecting them to key resources, support and networks.

WHY TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH?

We all have mental health – it's part of how we think, feel and act. Good mental health helps you cope with stress, build strong relationships, focus at school or work, and build the future you want. At the same time, struggling with your mental health is common, and can make even small problems feel huge.

You can be left feeling afraid, sad, angry or hopeless when faced with great stress, trauma and tragedies. The younger we are when we experience these, the more it can affect how we manage future challenges and how well we relate to other people. This is because stress and trauma change how the brain and body work. Added to the legacy of past trauma in many young people's lives is the current pressure from unemployment, violence, addiction, alcoholism and living in families without stability.

Sometimes you end up withdrawing from friends, losing interest in things you used to enjoy, or pretending everything is fine when you're actually hurting inside. Society often dismisses this, and makes people feel ashamed of being depressed or anxious. Boys and men, especially, are taught to hide their pain and struggles so as not to appear weak or needy. The problem is that pulling back often increases feelings of loneliness, which makes it harder. That's why talking about mental health matters.

WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH, REALLY?

Mental health challenges include a huge range of conditions and they are common. One in five people will suffer from one or other form during their lifetime. The signs vary, but if you feel overwhelmingly empty, helpless or worthless, like you can't cope with daily life, can't think straight, contemplate suicide, suffer from delusions or hallucinations, have excessive fears and anxieties, or lose interest in everything you used to enjoy, you need extra help. Bipolar disorders, depression, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders and personality disorder are all serious issues. Just like physical illnesses, they need to be treated by specialists.



Sadness vs depression

Everyone feels sad sometimes – it's a natural reaction to pain and usually passes with time and support. Depression is a deeper, darker feeling that lingers. Some people call it a 'black dog' that follows you everywhere, sucking the joy out of your life. It doesn't have to be that way, though. There is help and support.

COMMON CHALLENGES YOUNG PEOPLE FACE

Young people commonly struggle with:

- Anxiety about safety, fitting in, school, work and the future
- Low self-esteem from social media, bullying or body-image comparisons
- Sadness, hopelessness and thoughts of self-harm
- Stress from poverty, conflict, difficult home situations or unsafe environments
- Trauma from violence, abuse or other losses, with flashbacks and a sense of disconnect
- Loneliness and isolation, especially during family breakdowns or when there's no safe space to share feelings
- Substance abuse and addictive behaviours

These challenges are widespread, but there are steps you can take to regain balance.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY AND SUPPORT

We all thrive when we have strong connections with other people and feel we belong. Life feels more meaningful and enjoyable together, and it gives us a sense of purpose when we can care for each other. Sharing our difficulties lightens the load and reminds us that we are not alone.

Sanelisiwe Tshengwa



“bumb'INGOMSO taught me the importance of sisterhood. I was quite a socially anxious person growing up, but through bumb'INGOMSO, I overcame that. I learned how to interact with peers and how to reach out when I needed help. The call centre and professional social workers were always there for anyone who needed support, especially when going through mental health issues – that was great!

MYTHS VS FACTS

Prevalent myths about mental health increase the stigma of talking openly about our struggles, and isolate people who are suffering. But they are myths, not truth.

FACTS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health challenges do not mean you are weak. They often come from painful things that happened when you were younger, like abuse, neglect or being unsafe at home. Asking for help is brave, not weak.

Mental health struggles are not “all in your head.” Physical signs like chronic pain, fatigue, tension, a racing heart, panic, headaches, stomach problems and trouble sleeping are real signals your body is under stress – they are not imagined.

You can’t just “snap out of it.” Recovery can take time and often needs professional support and consistent strategies.

People who seek therapy aren’t crazy. Life is hard. Therapy helps anyone who wants to understand themselves and grow.

WHAT GOOD MENTAL HEALTH LOOKS LIKE

Good mental health isn’t as simple as just being positive or feeling happy. It’s about balance. It means you’re able to cope in tough times and keep growing. Part of that balance is learning to say “no” so that you don’t burn yourself out, and asking for help when you need it. This can feel unnatural or selfish, but it’s vital to make the time to care for yourself to be the best you can be.

NAMING YOUR FEELINGS

Learning to recognise difficult emotions is the first step to managing them. You may feel anger, sadness, fear, guilt, shame, jealousy, disappointment, shock, disgust. If you act on these emotions in the heat of the moment, you can say or do things that you regret later. Instead of letting them take over, try asking yourself:



- How am I really feeling?
- Why do I feel this way?
- Is there something I can do right now to feel better?
- Does this happen often? If so, what long-term solution would help?

EMOTIONAL REGULATION TOOLS

Once you can name your feelings, the next step is regulating them. This can be mistaken for hiding them, but it actually means working with them so that they don't rule your decisions. Here are some techniques to help you manage in the moment:

- Pause and do some deep breathing – it changes your physiology immediately. Try box breathing (inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold again for 4) for two minutes.
- Do one minute of intense activity – like star jumps or press-ups – to get the stress out of your system.
- Have a good cry or scream into a pillow to let it out.
- Take a short walk and focus on something else. Remind yourself that it will pass.
- Pay attention to other sensations – things you can see, smell and hear. This helps ground you in the moment where you are right now.

You can practise emotional regulation by setting aside “check-in” time each day, where you take a breath, close your eyes and pay attention to how you're feeling.

Emotions aren't good or bad. They're signals that you need to read so you can respond not react.



Try a free app, like Mindful SA or Smiling Mind for guided meditations and mindfulness techniques.



TAKING CHARGE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

When life feels overwhelming, it's easy to look for quick fixes like scrolling social media, eating sugary snacks, or watching shows to distract ourselves. **People also turn to** alcohol, drugs or vaping as a way to cope. The problem is these usually make things worse. What really helps is building resilience over time with healthy, lasting habits that care for your body, mind and relationships. Small daily choices add up.

CARE FOR YOUR BODY

Stress, poor diet, toxins and too little exercise directly affect your mood, energy and brain health. Here are some essential ways to care for your body:

- Eat whole foods – vegetables, fruit, eggs, meat, beans, lentils, pilchards, nuts and seeds. Avoid junk food and sweets.
- Your body needs eight glasses of water to stay hydrated. Start with one glass first thing in the morning to set yourself up for success. And avoid fizzy drinks. Although sugar-free or diet versions of these drinks are cleverly marketed to seem better for you, they are full of toxins that harm your gut, damage your teeth and lead to illness.
- Exercise! Run, walk, skip, dance, do home workouts (push-ups, squats, etc.), lift heavy objects, play sport. Get your heart rate up for 30 minutes five times a week. In between, make simple choices to move as much as possible, like using the stairs instead of the escalator, carrying your shopping bags rather than using a trolley, and walking short distances instead of using a vehicle.
- Stretch for 5 minutes in the morning. Yoga, stretching and even short bursts of movement release tension.
- Make sure you get 8 hours of sleep each night, and stick to the same bedtime for a healthy body rhythm.
- Spend time outside – walk or go chill at a local recreational park. Being in green spaces lowers stress, while 15–30 minutes of sunlight a day gives you the vitamin D you need to lift your mood and help you sleep better.
- Read the labels of cleaning/beauty products and avoid ones with toxic ingredients. Look up the ingredients before you put it on your body or use it in your home.



CARE FOR YOUR MIND

- Keep a journal to process your thoughts, release worries and become more aware of what triggers you.
- Practise mindfulness by paying attention to your breath, body sensations or surroundings without evaluating them.
- Note three things you're grateful for each day to train your brain to see positives.
- Take digital breaks to protect your mental space and don't look at your electronic devices for an hour before bed. Switch them all off when you sleep.
- Limit overwhelm by reducing exposure to negative news or overstimulating media.
- Clean and organise your space – living in a mess takes a toll on your mental state. Cleaning can also give you a simple sense of achievement.
- Be kind to yourself – try not to judge yourself or put yourself down.
- Learn something new – reading or a short course stimulates your brain.
- Get creative – dance, draw or play music to express yourself.



CARE FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

- Spend time with people who lift your spirits.
- Share meals and talk openly about what you're going through.
- Laugh often – share jokes with friends.
- Start a weekly “mental health check-in” with a friend where you talk openly about feelings and support each other's healthy habits.
- If you are isolated, join a safe, positive community – this could be a hobby/interest group or a support group.
- Do a virtual challenge with your friends (like a 7-day gratitude or movement challenge).
- Do something kind or helpful for someone else, or volunteer in your community. It creates purpose and connection.

By practising these habits, you give yourself the best chance to enjoy a more balanced life.



To build healthy habits, start small by picking three to do this week, and add one more at a time.

LOOKING AFTER YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ONLINE

Social media can be a great way to connect and share creative ideas, to share struggles, find people who get it and access advice when real-life support feels out of reach. But they also come with pressures that can take a toll on your mental health. Comparing yourself to others, especially on platforms like Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn, can make you feel anxious and insecure. Being expected to be online constantly to keep up, alongside reading reels of bad news or hurtful comments, also leaves you drained.

If you feel caught in this web, it isn't your fault. Social media apps are designed to be addictive. They use notifications, streaks and "likes" to trigger feel-good chemicals in your brain, making you want to come back again and again. They send you endless content of exactly what grabs your attention. This leads you to spend hours online and lose sleep, sucking energy from your real life, while starving you of contentment. A growing number of young people find it almost impossible to disconnect even when it hurts them.



Signs of social media addiction include spending hours online without realising it, feeling anxious or empty when you can't check your phone, neglecting schoolwork or hobbies, and pulling back from real-life relationships. Sleep is often one of the first things to suffer, which makes stress, anxiety and depression worse.

Breaking free isn't easy, but it is possible. You can take back control for your own mental health **as well as** your safety. Here's how you can do it:

- Balance screen time with real-life activities like sport, time outdoors and hanging out with friends.
- Pause before you post. Could this embarrass or hurt you later, either in a relationship or job application?
- Protect your privacy by limiting what personal info you share.
- Turn off location settings to keep yourself safe from predators, stalkers or thieves.
- Stick with platforms, groups or creators that lift you up. Unfollow, mute or block people who bring you down.
- Switch off notifications so you decide when to check what, not your phone.
- **Set time limits on your phone** so social media doesn't take over your day.

Remember that your worth isn't measured in likes or comments. Be kind to yourself, set healthy boundaries, and log off regularly to stay mentally healthy.

Check in with yourself



Notice how you feel after scrolling. Energised? Inspired? Or drained and anxious? If it's mostly negative, it's time for a digital detox.



Nothing online is private – content can be saved, shared or screenshot forever. If you wouldn't want your message or photo on a billboard with your name, don't post it online.

WHEN ONLINE SPACES HURT

Some online spaces, like Snapchat, enable cyberbullying with disappearing messages. Many social media platforms expose you to violence and explicit sexual images, and fuel negativity and body shaming, which is particularly damaging to young people. Fake news, harmful trends and toxic social media groups can also affect your self-esteem and encourage dangerous behaviour.

If you're being bullied online or seeing harmful content, tell someone you trust and report it. It is a crime to spread hate or defamation online as well as to share explicit pictures without consent, no matter if you create the post or passed it on.

ADDICTION AND PEER PRESSURE



Addiction – whether to alcohol, food, drugs, screens, sex or even overworking – often begins in small, ordinary ways. At first, it can feel like a way to belong, to escape or to cope with stress. But addiction isn't really about the substance or habit itself. It's usually an attempt to soothe deeper emotional pain. Many mental health struggles and addictions can be traced back to unresolved trauma or chronic stress.

Unhealthy pressure to fit in makes these struggles worse. It isn't only from friends. It can come from parents, the media or social expectations. Sometimes it's obvious, like friends urging you to drink alcohol, try drugs or take dangerous risks. Other times it's subtle, like being teased for not keeping up with trends.

When past pain meets peer pressure, the dangers of drinking and other risky behaviours are even higher. Doing something just to fit in can damage your mental health, leaving you tense, worried, lonely or stressed. Constantly comparing yourself can make you feel worthless, while giving in to pressure can leave you with regret. Some young people withdraw to protect themselves, which only adds to their loneliness.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

The first step is to be honest about what's driving an unhealthy urge. Stress, trauma and loneliness can make alcohol or other addictions feel like an easy escape. The second step is to notice unhealthy pressure. Being out with friends, buying alcohol and partying might feel like it gives you confidence or helps you forget what you're going through. But consuming alcohol increases your risk of sexual assault, car accidents, fights and unprotected sex that can lead to HIV, STIs and unplanned pregnancy. Over time, it also harms your brain, liver and heart, raises your cancer risk, and during pregnancy can permanently damage the baby.

If you find yourself doing something that makes you uncomfortable or feels dangerous – even if it looks normal or fun – that feeling is your instinct warning you. Trust it and remove yourself from the situation. If you're using drugs or alcohol to cope, get help early through professional counsellors, community clinics and support groups.

<BOX>In South Africa, alcohol is linked to over half of injury-related deaths, murders and road accidents, and plays a huge role in suicides and sexual violence.</BOX>

MAKE YOUR OWN CHOICES

Saying “no” is hard, especially when you want connection, approval or an escape. But you don't need alcohol, drugs or risky sexual behaviour to be fun, confident or accepted. True friends will value you for who you are.

The tragedy at Enyobeni Tavern, where 21 young people died, reminds us of what is at stake. While parents, tavern owners and the government must be responsible, remember that you always have a choice to protect your future.



LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Everyone makes mistakes. The choices we make are often shaped by past experiences, which influence how we react in the moment. We need to deal with these so that they do not define us. But we also need to remember that mistakes are a great teacher.

If you regret a choice you made, it actually shows that you care about yourself and your values. Instead of getting stuck, think about what happened and focus on what you can learn. Talk it through with someone you trust, or reach out for professional help.

ACCOUNTABILITY VS BLAME

Blame focuses on finding who is at fault and often leads to shame and punishment, which shuts down growth. Accountability is different – it's about acknowledging what happened and shifting your energy to repair any harm that was done. A sincere apology acknowledges the impact of your actions and communicates respect for the other person. As part of it, ask what you can do to fix the situation.



A growth mindset treats any challenge as a chance to learn. Each time you face difficulties and take responsibility, you build resilience.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

When you've messed up, it can feel like everyone is watching you, waiting for you to slip again. Sometimes even your friends and family may not trust you right away. That can feel unfair, especially when you're trying to change. But trust is built slowly. People need to see consistency before they believe the change is real.

That doesn't mean you're stuck in your past mistakes. But it does mean it's going to take patience and persistence. Every small step you take adds up. Things like keeping your word, taking responsibility, being supportive and honest, and making healthier choices. Over time, others will notice.

WHEN AND HOW TO ASK FOR HELP

Reaching out when you are struggling can feel scary, but you don't have to suffer in silence. Start small by talking to someone you trust, or look for a school counsellor, a clinic or a therapist.

WHEN IT FEELS TOO HEAVY

If life ever feels too much, reach out immediately. Call a trusted person, a mental health helpline, or emergency services in your area. Counsellors and therapists are trained to help and can offer a confidential space to work through whatever you are going through.

COMFORT FOR OTHERS

If you're in a position to support someone else, who confides in you, you can help gently by:

- Wrapping them in a blanket to provide comfort.
- Listening to them without judgement.
- Creating a calming environment (soft music, a tidy space, or a candle).
- Doing something routine together like making tea, watering plants, going for a walk.
- Offering gentle distractions, such as reading, colouring or simple games.



You don't have to face issues alone. Counsellors and youth support lines are here to listen. In South Africa, you can call the BI call centre toll-free 0800 555 558.



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