

# The psychological impact of lockdown

Maintaining good mental health has emerged as a major challenge for South Africans this year, in large part due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. With October being Mental Health Awareness Month, there is not a more fitting time to take a hard look at the psychological effect that the pandemic and subsequent nationwide lockdown is having on us all.



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This negative psychological impact is second only to the financial strain that South African households have been subjected to in 2020. "Having chatted to more than 450,000 South Africans on Facebook Messenger, we utilised our in-house chatbot technology to get a clearer picture of how Covid-19 has impacted their financial and mental health. The results were eye-opening," says Monique Elliott, head of marketing at CompariSure.

She explains that 20% of the participants indicated that mental health was their biggest challenge during lockdown. In addition, 53% listed financial strain as their primary challenge, with 41% having said that one or more members of the household had been left unemployed by the pandemic. "It is well known that financial strain and unemployment add additional pressure to the mental health struggles of people."

These findings are supported by recent observations of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag), which reported that the daily number of incoming calls from people feeling anxious, panicked and stressed, have more than doubled since the start of lockdown. Sadag reports that nearly half of these callers are under financial pressure.

"At this point it is clear that while measures such as social distancing and the lockdown have helped to flatten South Africa's Covid-19 curve, this uncertain time has added to the isolation, depression and anxiety that people experience on a daily basis," Elliott says.

## Likely to remain

Even as the intensity of South Africa's lockdown has been reduced with the Alert Level 1 announcement some weeks ago, CompariSure's research indicates that the heightened mental and emotional pressure that many South Africans are currently experiencing is likely to remain.

“At present, around 26% of individuals believe that conditions in South Africa will never be the same again,” says Elliott, who believes that this view is justified. “The unemployment rate in South Africa is showing no signs of improving yet, and measures like social distancing are likely to remain the norm for quite some time.”

Still, she notes that the survey does outline one small glimmer of hope. “People did display some optimism towards returning to a new normal, and 67% of South Africans felt positive about gradually moving out of hard lockdown.”

It is with this positive attitude that Elliott believes South Africans will be able to counteract the emotional impact of the Covid-19 lockdown. “We need to stay strong, look after each other and do our utmost to become more resilient in the face of this adversity if we are to build up and preserve our mental health in the months and years to come,” she concludes.

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