Let's make 2025 the year of "Mental Help"

As we enter a new year, we must recognise that from time-to-time, everyone struggles with mental health issues. Just as everyone struggles, on occasion, with physical health issues.

No one judges you for seeing a doctor when you have the flu. So why would we judge each other for seeking help when we are down mentally? But whilst doctors are relatively easy to find (and we usually know when we need one), where do we even start to get help when we are down?

The 2023 Mental State of the World Report by Sapien Labs reveals that South Africa ranks among the bottom three countries for the Mental Health Quotient, and out of 71 countries it has the highest percentage of people in distress. We need help – and urgently so.

We need to recognise that there are many factors that contribute to our state of wellness, such as financial stress, addiction, burnout, lack of positive role models, our upbringing and socialisation, gender-based violence (GBV), and environmental influences such as poverty and pollution. With so many of us struggling with one or more of these issues, we need to get support *before* it becomes a crisis.

But getting support poses a challenge, because stigma remains an issue. Will I be judged or labelled? Will people think I "can't cope"? In many cultures, discussions about seeking help can be fraught with judgment. A friend recently shared: "When you mention seeing a psychologist or psychiatrist to family, you instantly feel judged or that your issues are not 'real' compared to others' struggles."

A further challenge to getting the help we need is that in South Africa, accessing mental health support is not always easy. A 2019 study indicated that there is an average of only 0.31 psychiatrists per 100,000

people in the public sector, with a stark disparity between urban and rural areas. Furthermore, there is a critical shortage of child psychiatrists across the nine provinces.

So, what practical steps can we all take to access the mental help we need?

Become support savvy: If you or anyone you know are showing signs of crisis, there are numerous organisations and national helplines doing incredible work supporting South Africans. These include the SA Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), the Suicide Crisis Line, Lifeline, the National Gambling Hotline etc. These services are free of charge.

Normalise needing help: We need to normalise that getting support with our mental health is as normal as getting support for physical health challenges. We will do this by having open conversations about our mental health.

Where do we begin? From how we speak at the dinner table to how we respond when someone is not coping, everyone can start by listening with care and not jumping to judgement. Ask people questions like: "How is your mental and physical health at the moment?" rather than just: "How are you?"

Share your story: When you share *your* story of seeking support, it makes it easier for others to share their struggles. I have led numerous workshops where leaders share how they needed and looked for mental health support. The positive impact this has on others is immense. Sharing personal stories about seeking help can play a vital role in breaking stigma.

Finally, there are only benefits from taking the plunge and getting help – no matter how hard it may be. A parent I recently spoke to reported that she had initially delayed seeking support until reaching a crisis point: "It was difficult to start therapy and face challenges, but it provided me with perspective and helped me understand my behaviour patterns. Although I know my healing journey is long, I can now identify and change destructive behaviours, which has profoundly impacted my life and relationships."

Let's make 2025 a year of compassion for ourselves and others and get the help we need to live full and happy lives.

Taegan Devar is an Industrial Psychologist and the Managing Director of Organisational Development company PeopleSmart (www.peoplesmart.global)