

Lusito School Puts Mental Health In The Spotlight

Mental health issues are on the rise and learners are increasingly at risk

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) estimates that as many as one in five people will suffer from a mental illness at least once in their lives. Additionally, bullying and suicide, along with a host of undiagnosed conditions, are on the rise. South African schools are undoubtedly feeling the impact of mental health issues in classrooms.

Therefore, this October, with Mental Health Awareness Month in mind, the Lusito School is urging educational institutions to embrace programmes and initiatives that create an environment that removes the stigma of mental health issues, and empowers those feeling the effects to seek help. Lusito School caters for learners with moderate, severe and profound cognitive limitations together with physical challenges.

Over the years the Lusito School has received a lot of positive feedback from parents or caregivers, who have welcomed their focus on mental wellbeing. However, the school's specific needs have brought about unique challenges. The fact is, there is an uncomfortable reality that society doesn't really cater for children or adults with mental and physical disability are also members of "normal society". As a result, they tend to close off and retreat into the shadows, not easily revealing conditions such as anxiety, depression, panic attacks, or paranoia. It is, however, fortunate that Lusito School has learnt to seek out the signs and offer the required compassion and understanding.

"Since the majority of our learners have been part of our school for many years, we have formed close relationships with their families or caregivers, where they feel comfortable to talk to us about their personal struggles and challenges with their children. This support system takes on the form of a mental health awareness programme within itself," says Diana Ribeiro, Physiotherapist at Lusito School.

The impact has been far reaching. Through various training techniques, taught to staff over the years, the ability to recognise when a parent or caregiver is struggling to cope with the daily challenges of caring for a child with a mental and physical disability, has been enhanced.



The management at Lusito School have employed a specific four step strategy (M.I.N.D) to recognise and manage mental health issues. These are:

Motivate teachers to recognise behavioural changes.

Identify emotional triggers and possible root causes.

Note behaviour and relay the information to management.

Discuss and recommend professional treatment options with parents or caregivers.

In all types of educational institutions solutions do exist. But real change will require a collective approach from everyone in education to recognise the issue and take practical and tangible steps to address it. It is also essential that there are statutory wellbeing policies in all education institutions, for regulators to prioritise student wellbeing in their assessments, and for policymakers to acknowledge the vital role staff can play in assisting those who need additional care.

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Words: 465

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About Lusito School

The school, located in the south of Johannesburg, started off as a small day care centre and has developed into a fully-fledged school for the differently-abled. Today, the school has more than 80 learners who come from all cultures across South Africa and other parts of Africa.

"Working together, we can support those who need help. In doing so, we create a culture of understanding and care that positively impacts learners as well as our communities," says Deolinda Molina, Principal at Lusito School.

