

A looming mental health crisis hiding in plain sight

WERNER VAN DYK

SIZA Audit Manager

COVID-19 has introduced a hidden battle causing global trauma. Here's a look at the mental health implications of the pandemic.

It has been described as "the world's largest psychological experiment" by many experts within the mental health and psychiatry realm. The World Economic Forum (WEF) published an article by Dr Elke Van Hoof, Professor of Health and Primary Care Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit in Brussels, highlighting that around 2.6 billion people around the world are in some form of lockdown, and as a global nation, we are arguably conducting the largest psychological experiment in history. This lockdown will undoubtedly result in a secondary epidemic of severe burnouts and stress-related illness in this latter half of 2020.

In SA, the circumstances of citizens caught up in confinement differ dramatically, as our nation ranges from a minority of comparatively affluent families or individuals, to those less fortunate. The economic effect of lockdown has been devastating in SA. This has been noticeable in people waiting in long queues for food parcels and other basic services. Regardless of the impact on finances and economic growth, the way in which these factors impact our nation's mental health has not been adequately addressed. A Human Science Research Council (HSRC) led research consortium has indicated that SA is in a "moment of psychological crisis". As the pandemic rapidly progresses across the world, it is causing a significant degree of concern and fear in populations throughout SA. The effects of prolonged quarantines and lockdowns exacerbate levels of depression, loneliness, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicidal behaviour. A major concern remains: SA is not placing enough emphasis on the mental well-being of citizens.

Farmworkers and agri-businesses face endless pressures from uncertainty surrounding wages to employee leave benefits, toughened regulations regarding internal safety procedures, and transport restrictions (to name a few). The impracticality of certain regulations made many agri-businesses question the way forward and has resulted in a continuous cycle of anxiety-induced doubt. It is not only business owners and managers facing extremes, but as Dr Charity Mkone, a clinical psychologist and associate lecturer at Wits University stated: "It is a global trauma that everyone is going through." Together with this anxiety and challenges in the workplace, farmworkers are

facing other personal struggles by not being able to see their families, dealing with wage-reductions and confronting unprecedented uncertainty regarding the future and personal safety. But the agricultural sector has risen above and beyond in its ability and resilience to plan, guide and lead stakeholders and members through this global crisis. All associations and

businesses have held hands in sharing relevant information and providing as much resources as possible to allow for members to adequately prepare and implement the necessary actions. These resources are distributed on a regular basis amongst all agricultural affiliates. Guidelines and information on what to do became freely accessible.

It is a well-known assumption that the majority of people don't talk about their feelings or acknowledge the emotional effects a situation might have on them. The World Health

Organisation (WHO) highlights the importance of treating people with empathy and compassion during this time.

The effects of prolonged quarantines and lockdowns exacerbate levels of depression, loneliness, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicidal behaviour.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

Collaborative beekeeping towards a professional pollination service

It is important to acquire sites with sufficient food for bees to survive the off-season. Often bees will be moved three times a year to have access to suitable food. These sites can vary from year to year, depending on what has been planted in the vicinity in that particular year (e.g. canola). Acquiring sites for transit camps during the pollination period is also important. Inevitably, a lot of colonies have to be moved over great distances from the beekeeper's base and have to be regularly fed, at great cost. The long distances and increased transport expenses then infringe on available time to work the bees, due to extended travelling time. This results in a reduction of total hives worked per worker per day, exacerbating the financial impact even further.

The various factors that influence the recommended pollination tariff are bound to differ in terms of importance as well as relevance, depending on the nature of the individual beekeeping business.

As for the cost of pollination, it comprises picking up beehives, loading them on a bakkie, driving to the orchard and offloading, and then repeating these actions in about two weeks' time, in reverse. Then there's the matter of keeping bees for pollination, which involves yearlong management.

The recent drought and fires have resulted in an extensive loss of bee forage, increasing the need to feed regularly for longer. This could impact beekeepers as follows:

1. Hives have been lost in the fires, presenting high costs to replace hives and bees.

2. Destroyed forage has resulted in increased bee feeding, at great cost.

3. Bees have been moved much further away, to new sites with more forage.

Beekeeping is very similar to stock farming, particularly pertaining to the carrying capacity of the site that you are on. A mere 15% increase in the stocking rate could translate in a 50% decrease in honey production. Most pollination hives are now overstocked on sites due a great shortage of good, safe sites. Over the years, this has impacted heavily on honey revenue per hive, for example, one hive now produces an average of only 10 - 13 kg of honey per annum. This was not the case in the 1980s, when average production exceeded 25 kg per annum.

Theft and vandalism also have a great impact on annual operating costs - in some cases, clocking up to 30% (according to the South African Agricultural Research Council). Then there's the annual spring maintenance on all hives, which relates to the exchange of at least two brood frames in each hive with new wax sheets; disease inspection and control; feeding where necessary; and replacing broken equipment.

Beekeepers normally keep a certain percentage of extra hives in reserve, in case of deaths during pollination and other emergencies. Last year these reserves were insufficient, resulting in a shortage of bees during pollination. Currently, the flowering periods of different fruits (and crops) overlap. Where beekeepers would normally be able to use the same hive on pears and then transport them to apples, they've had to bring in separate

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35

How managers can support workers/employees:

- Ensure that teams remain informed.
- Regularly send tips and guidelines to everyone's phone or place them in a general, accessible area.
- Have regular discussions about how everyone is doing.
- Address and alleviate anxieties and doubts.
- Convert the workplace into a therapeutic place for constructive discussion.
- Encourage employees to raise concerns and to collaborate with management on possible solutions.

- Continue to normalise the fear amongst the farmworkers (explaining that the crisis is global, and that we should all support each other).
- Be open to contracting independent help, if necessary.

As this pandemic continues to sweep through our nation, we must remain aware of its future presence and be hopeful that, as a compassionate society and industry, we can overcome the effects of this virus by continuing to raise awareness and support fellow agri-businesses as much as possible. ❀