

# NPO mental health support programme, helpline launched

Tshikululu Social Investments has partnered with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) on an NPO mental health support programme called NPOwer to provide psychological first aid to NPO leaders, staff and volunteers, many of whom are experiencing unprecedented strain and burnout caused by Covid-19. It includes a 24-hour toll-free helpline to offer mental healthcare and support.



Image source: [www.pexels.com](http://www.pexels.com)

“Our minds became shut down.” This is one of many responses received in a recent survey conducted by Tshikululu Social Investments to assess the effect that Covid-19 has had on this crucial sector, with many NPOs experiencing the twin burden of financial survival in the midst of increasing and overwhelming need.

While the pandemic has had a significant impact on NPOs from an operations and funding perspective, it is the mental health of those involved within the NPO sector that is particularly concerning, which has resulted in the launch of this NPO specific mental health support programme.

## Pervasive fears, negative psychological effects

“The pandemic has resulted in various pervasive fears and negative psychological effects on individuals, resulting in a need for more psychosocial support to affected communities. This, of course, applies not only to individuals and communities being served by NPOs, but to the employees and volunteers of these organisations themselves. Our research has shown that NPOs are struggling with a myriad of issues, including instability and uncertainty around financial support, challenges in retaining staff, as well as having to navigate the devastating impact of Covid on the communities that they serve,” says Dipalesa Mpye, a social investment specialist at Tshikululu Social Investments.

“While many corporates have employee assistance programmes in place for their employees, and relief funding has been provided for specific responses such as food relief and health system strengthening, the wellbeing of NPOs, who are at the frontline in serving communities throughout lockdown, has largely been forgotten. The need for this type of integrated psychological support programme is very clear,” Mpye says.



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## Prioritising mental health of NPOs

Comments Cassey Chambers, operations director at SADAG, “Many NPOs have been left in the dark. Teams are overworked, they are facing trauma and lack of resources every day. With so many pandemic-related issues, some NPOs have been forced to close their doors and stop the valuable work they have been providing when communities need it the most. NPOs have always provided help, resources and support to others, but never before has the mental health of our NPOs been prioritised.”

Kelly du Plessis, CEO and lead patient advocate of Rare Diseases South Africa, an NPO established in 2013, says that it is well known that NPO staff are often impacted by compassion fatigue, due to the emotionally giving dynamic of the sector, compounded by the often personal nature of the services provided.

## Mental health often overlooked

“During Covid-19, our mental health was further impacted due to the continuous financial stress of a downturned economy, coupled with many additional services needing to be provided to assist the most vulnerable members of society,” she says. Du Plessis believes that mental health is one of those things that is all too often overlooked or ignored until it is too late. “Mental health support needs to be implemented throughout the sector to build resilience, avoid burnout, and ensure that the sector can continue to provide the much-needed services,” she says.

With the launch of this much-needed psychological support programme taking place within Mental Health Awareness Month, Chambers says that highlighting the effects of the Covid- 19 pandemic on our collective mental health needs to remain a priority.

“SADAG has been receiving more calls since the start of lockdown from people feeling anxious, lonely, worried and depressed. Many callers are stressed about a combination of issues, including the spread of Covid-19, finances, relationship problems, job security, grief, gender-based violence and trauma,” she says.



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## Impact of pandemic ongoing

“While our Tshikululu NPO Partner Survey showed promising levels of resilience and optimism, we need to assist NPOs to remain as strong as possible as they go about their invaluable work, as the impact of the pandemic is far from over,” says Mpye. “We are excited and humbled by this partnership with SADAG and value enormously the work they do, being at the forefront of patient advocacy, education and destigmatisation of mental illness in South Africa.”

The NPower programme will include a dedicated 24-hour NPO Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Helpline run by a team of dedicated counsellors, capacity workshops on NPO-related issues, a dedicated website to house multiple resources and the implementation of a support network between NPOs.

The tollfree NPower helpline will be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, with counselling available in all 11 official languages and is now live on 0800515515. Messages can also be sent to a dedicated SMS line on 43010 or to [info@npowersa.org](mailto:info@npowersa.org). More details about NPower can be found at [www.npowersa.org](http://www.npowersa.org).

## **Key mental health skills**

“There are so many aspects to the health of NPOs which we hope to assist with this initiative. This includes reducing the burnout and stress experienced by NPOs and providing key mental health skills to NPO leaders to ensure that they are able to look after the mental health of their staff and build mental wellness going forward,” Chambers says.

“Strengthening advocacy and capacity amongst the NPO sector, providing capacity building skills and knowledge and helping NPOs to network and develop regional NPO groups are just some of the goals that we see Tshikululu and SADAG achieving with NPower.”

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