

PATIENTS AS PARTNERS

Brought to you by The South African Depression and Anxiety Group

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SADAG – SA's most influential mental health NGO

And what they can do for your patients?

By Janine Shamos

For 16 years, the counsellors of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) have provided a haven of hope and support for those with mental illnesses. For the thousands of desperate people who call every month for themselves or their loved ones, SADAG's counsellors are the last line of defence in an often bleak world. "SADAG works with GPs, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers throughout the country to destigmatise mental illness and support patients and their loved ones through the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness", says Elizabeth Matare, SADAG's Chief Executive. As South Africa's largest mental health NGO, SADAG is at the forefront of patient support, and partners with medical professionals to bring treatment and care to all South Africans. If you haven't yet worked with SADAG, or told your patients about SADAG, this article will tell you what they do.

Mental illness is still severely misunderstood and stigmatised, and patients can feel sidelined, neglected and alone, and are often terrified to ask for help. SADAG was founded for exactly this reason – to give all South Africans a safe place to turn when they need advice, support, and treatment options. Whether it's Bipolar, PTSD, Anxiety or Depression, whether it's genetic, environmental or as a result of another illness, SADAG's 15-line call centre is open seven days a week, 365 days a year from 8am to 8pm. Over 400 calls a day are answered by highly trained, empathetic counsellors who not only give telephonic support but send out free brochures and information packs – from anxiety to insomnia, and depression to managing chronic pain, from how to handle side effects to the process of coming off medication, SADAG is there. SADAG also offers crisis intervention and assists in the emergency admission of at risk and suicidal patients to hospitals across the country. When you are away or unavailable, you can be assured that your patients have a life line to call – SADAG is the trusted name in mental health advocacy, education and support in South Africa. "At SADAG we try relentlessly to eliminate stigma from mental illness. "You have to get involved so that you can understand what the person is going through", says counsellor Lungelo Mavuso.

Besides SADAG's counselling call centre, they also have an SMS line that receives SMSes daily, often from distraught, acutely depressed patients. "The aim is to get the person's contact details so we can call them and assist in whatever their crisis is – often they're feeling suicidal, have already taken an overdose or are cutting, or are coming down from a drug high and are unable to cope", says Agata a counsellor with five years at the centre. SADAG also uses this service to alert members to upcoming TV and radio programmes, mental health articles in newspapers and magazines, as well as to mental health awareness events like Bipolar Awareness Day or World Mental Health Day on the 10th October. This service is very useful for informing patients of new support groups in their area.

South Africa has 22 suicides a day, and 220 attempted suicides. One of SADAG's most critical services is their toll-free suicide crisis line and their work with suicidal callers. They offer crisis intervention, and assist in the emergency admission of at risk patients to hospitals across the country. SADAG is, quite literally, the last life line for hundreds of South Africans. Over 100 volunteer counsellors, some of whom have been with SADAG for over 14 years, are highly trained after careful screening. "Only after they have been through one of our bi-annual intensive training weekends and completed a further 8 week trial in the call centre, are they given shifts", explains Matare. Volunteers are trained not only to answer calls, but also how to manage a crisis and deal with the stress that invariably comes with the job on one of SA's busiest counselling lines – counselling at SADAG carries with it the responsibility of weighty decisions often made under pressure.

"Callers to our centre often feel very alone and scared, they have either just received a diagnosis of a mental illness or have been in denial for years. SADAG is there to offer hope and practical advice – and to let them know they are not alone", says Cassey Chambers, Operations Director. To this end, SADAG sends out over 16 000 newsletters a month which notifies people about upcoming events, workshops and services, and facilitates 180 Support Groups nationwide. In all the major cities, from Durban to Cape Town, Bloemfontein, to Port Elizabeth to smaller towns like Howick, Worcester, and Newcastle, to townships and rural areas like Soweto, Diepsloot and Mabopane, SADAG helps over 160 dedicated Support Group leaders run groups to help patients, loved ones, and communities to understand and destigmatise mental illness and support sufferers, not only of depression but also HIV and AIDS, TB, cancer and survivors of suicide, which all have a very strong depression component. SADAG's longest running Support Group in Siyabuswa, is run by Peter Matlhaela who received help from SADAG for his own panic in 1996 and then started his own Siyabuswa Support Group. Peter says, "There is often a misheld belief that mental illness doesn't affect black, rural communities" – and Peter is there to prove that theory wrong and provide information and hope within his own community and for newly opened support groups from neighbouring townships. Support Group leaders are an invaluable part of SADAG's work, and help patients, especially those without funds, or whose medical schemes have run out. Jay and Michelle work with SADAG and run three bipolar support groups in Cape Town. "Running the groups has had a huge impact on our lives. People need to be uplifted and given guidance, and support. When a person is in real trouble you drop whatever you're doing and go to help them", says Michelle. And for the future Jay says, "I can't imagine us not running the group. There is such limited help for those that have mental illnesses." A major part of treatment and healing is for patients and family members to learn and to share their experiences in a non-judgmental environment.

SADAG's comprehensive mental health website (www.sadag.co.za) not only offers downloadable brochures and information on illnesses like depression and anxiety, but has information on new local and international books on mental illness, DVD series, articles, Clinical Trial information, as well as information on SADAG's ongoing school, corporate and rural outreach work. The site also features online videos that allow viewers to hear experts talk on various mental illnesses – Dr Colinda Linde speaks about Panic and Anxiety, Dr Leigh Janet answers questions about Bipolar Disorder, and Dr Frans Korb discusses the growing issue of Men and

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Depression. This allows patients a way to have their questions answered by professionals and have access to this information 24 hours a day. The website is useful for anyone interested in mental health – either as a sufferer, loved one, or scholar – and offers people in outlying areas who may not have access to mental health services, reliable information. “SADAG has over 500 000 hits a month, and many people who access the site are those whose families or loved ones have been recently diagnosed and they’re looking for more information and understanding,” says Elizabeth Matare. Due in part to their extensive list of psychiatrists and psychologists who work with SADAG and the press, SADAG is involved in radio, TV, magazine and newspaper articles on a constant basis. At the moment the value of media covering mental health through stories issued by SADAG is around R5 million per month, these stories are balanced, educational with case studies and always offer a help line or contact.

An invaluable new service SADAG is offering is a Free Medication Reminder SMS Service for your patients who have been recently diagnosed with an illness that requires them to take prescribed medication daily. With an SMS reminder, you as a physician never have to worry about your patients forgetting to take their medication. This free service includes access to information about the diagnosed illness, advice on how to handle side effects, an SMS reminder sent to patient's mobile phone, as well as telephonic counselling and support. Patients can register for this free service between 9am and 12 noon on 0800 753 379.

SADAG works closely with sponsors:

- Whether putting a free counselling container in Diepsloot which is funded by Janssen Cilag to help counsel 160,000 people living in a community with no counseling services or GlaxoSmithKline helping us to start an additional 20 rural support groups
- AstraZeneca who sponsor a dedicated Bipolar toll free line
- Mental health brochures supported by Eli Lilly
- Police and Trauma help line sponsored by PharmaDynamics
- Patient care and compliance via internet and SMS services funded by Lundbeck
- Sanofi Aventis who fund a help line for sleep problems with or without mental health problems
- Adcock Ingram support us with brochures on Anxiety
- Dr Reddy's and their awareness program of orange ribbon stickers, pillboxes and a mental health helpline
- Department of Social Development for their 24 hour Substance Abuse help line and schools programme
- Pfizer global support for speaking books for low literacy health care
- BARC Pharmaceutical for printing brochures for World Mental Health Day
- Aspen for helping us develop outreach programs in under serviced areas in Gauteng and Limpopo
- Medihelp and their series of televised mental health programmes on 12 topics from Depression to Panic to Bipolar and more

These are just our medical sponsors. We must never forget:

- Starfish our wonderful SMS service providers
- Metropolitan Republic Advertising Agency for designing billboards, adverts and radio PSAs
- Liberty Life for the donation of office space
- SPSS for free research software
- Newscorp who give us accurate reports monthly and weekly on our press coverage
- Discovery Health for our photocopy machines
- Dell Computers for our donated computers
- Finally, the many many psychiatrists and psychologists, who help us in our frequent training sessions and many workshops, and who give up their weekends and evenings, to encourage our volunteers to continue their learning process.

What is most noticeable, by their total absence is OUR government who never allocate money into Mental Health Care. It is last on their list and frequently ignored. We are constantly devastated by this omission. We battle to find money monthly and value the support of every donor however small.

Through our call centre, community talks and corporate workshops, wellness days and outreach programmes, SADAG gives hope to the hopeless, and opens doors to treatment and support for the millions of South Africans trapped in their private prisons of mental illness. Let SADAG help you to help your patients. One of SADAG's longest standing volunteers, Shanne, sums it up perfectly: “The South African Depression and Anxiety has given me a space where I could help all South Africans, irrespective of age, gender, creed or socio economic standing, through a simple telephone. Twelve years of counselling have taught me humility and made me more aware of how desperately the need for mental health education is. Passion is our driving force and dedication sustains us all.”

IMPORTANT NUMBERS TO REMEMBER

Suicide Crisis Line: 0800 567 567 or SMS 31393

Pharmadynamics Police and Trauma Line: 0800 20 50 26

AstraZeneca Bipolar Line: 0800 70 80 90

Sanofi Aventis Sleep Line: 0800-SLEEPY (0800 753 379)

**Dept. of Social Development Substance Abuse Line:
0800 12 13 14 or SMS 32312**

Dr Reddy's Helpline: 0800 21 22 23

Office Lines: 011 262 6396

Website: www.sadag.co.za