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Early mental health support urgently needed among young adolescents in schools – UCT study



Mirriam Mkhize

Photo: Supplied

Research from the University of Cape Town (UCT) has found a concerning prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms among young adolescents in the Western Cape, highlighting the need for earlier mental health support in South African schools.

The findings form part of the PhD research of Mirriam Mkhize, a social worker and researcher whose work focuses on addressing the mental health needs of school-going adolescents aged 10–14. She will graduate on Tuesday, 31 March 2026 with a PhD in Psychiatry.

Her thesis is titled "Addressing the mental health needs of school-going adolescents aged 10-14 years old in the Western Cape province of South Africa". The research was funded by the Sue Struengmann Initiative and supervised by Professor Katherine Sorsdahl and Associate Professor Claire van der Westhuizen.

Her research examined the prevalence and factors associated with depression and anxiety among young adolescents, evaluated the psychometric properties of screening tools in low-resource school contexts, and assessed the feasibility and acceptability of a co-adapted World Health Organization (WHO) Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions (EASE) intervention.

As part of the study, Mkhize surveyed 621 learners aged 10–14 across 10 primary schools in the Western Cape to understand the prevalence of mental health symptoms. The findings revealed that 33% of learners experienced symptoms of depression, while 21% reported symptoms of anxiety.

"Notably, these symptoms were not isolated; they were strongly associated with factors including school-related pressure (higher grades), substance use and exposure to family violence. This suggests that mental health support must be integrated with broader social and educational initiatives and highlights the need for early mental health promotion and prevention during early adolescence," she said.

While these results are based on adolescents from schools in the Western Cape and are not nationally representative, Mkhize said they provide a concerning baseline for understanding the mental health of this age group. "It is important to clarify that while these figures indicate a high symptom prevalence rather than clinical diagnoses, they underscore an urgent need for comprehensive school-based mental health support and early intervention."

The study highlights how broader social factors influence adolescent mental health.

"In contexts where families and communities are experiencing economic hardship, exposure to violence or ongoing stress, adolescents may face additional emotional and psychological challenges," Mkhize explained.

Her research found that exposure to family violence and substance use, particularly alcohol and cannabis, significantly increased the likelihood of adolescents experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Mkhize said: "This suggests that mental health support must be integrated with broader social and educational initiatives and highlights the need for early mental health promotion and prevention during early adolescence."

Schools are often one of the few stable environments where adolescents' mental health needs can be recognised and addressed. However, many schools face structural constraints that limit their ability to provide mental health support.

Another part of Mkhize's research examined the psychometric properties of mental health screening tools for identifying depression and anxiety symptoms among adolescents in low-resource school settings.

The results showed that some tools performed well in resource-constrained school contexts, but they still require validation and adaptation for the local context.

“These findings have implications that could help improve early detection and intervention for mental health conditions in settings where specialised mental health services are limited,” Mkhize said.

Mkhize also assessed the feasibility and acceptability of a co-adapted version of the World Health Organization’s EASE intervention, designed to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety among adolescents and improve parenting skills among caregivers.

The South African version of the EASE (EASE-SA) intervention delivered among 79 adolescents and 33 caregivers, was found to be feasible to deliver in school settings and acceptable to participants. The study showed improvements in symptoms of depression, anxiety and mental wellbeing among adolescents, while caregivers reported improvements in parenting practices, including reduced use of corporal punishment, and increased use of the skills taught in the intervention.

Mkhize said investing in adolescent mental health is a public health priority because many mental health conditions begin during adolescence, and early experiences can shape wellbeing across the life course.

She added that poor mental health during adolescence can also have broader societal consequences. “If depression and anxiety are not recognised and treated early, they can persist into adulthood and affect education, employment opportunities, relationships and overall quality of life,” she said.

However, adolescence also represents a critical window for prevention and early intervention.

“Supporting young people during this stage can strengthen coping skills, improve emotional wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of severe mental health conditions later in life. Investing in school-based mental health promotion, early identification and accessible support services therefore has the potential to generate significant long-term benefits for individuals, communities and the broader economy,” she said.

Mkhize’s next steps focus on scaling evidence-based mental health interventions for adolescents in schools.

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