Panda app: first of its kind in addressing mental-health needs this festive season

It is estimated that one out of every three South Africans will suffer from some form of mental health problem at some time in their lives.

Source: Pexels

What makes this statistic even more alarming is the fact that "up to 80% of South Africans who need mental health support are unable to access it easily" according to Cassey Chambers, operations director, South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) quoting the National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2013-2020.

It is known that difficult and stressful experiences at Christmas can make your mental health worse.

But now there's a potential solution to this challenge in the form of the Panda app - a free-to-download digital app that is designed to put mental health information, community support and expert help literally in the palm of your hand.

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The Join Panda App is the brainchild of Allan Sweidan, a clinical psychologist who previously co-founded and headed up the Akeso Group of psychiatric hospitals, and Alon Lits, former GM and director of Uber in Sub-Saharan Africa. The app makes it easy for anyone to invest time into their mental wellbeing by anonymously connecting to an array of valuable resources to assist them on their journey to improved mental health.

Online peer support

Users of the app have free access to the 'Bamboo Forest', which allows them to engage with a community of other app users who may be facing similar challenges. Here, they can also participate in audio-only peer or expert-facilitated group discussions to gain a better understanding of mental health-related topics. They can also create communities within the Bamboo Forest, aligned with their individual interests or support needs, whether it be depression, financial stress, anxiety,

or even guidance for families with loved ones facing mental health challenges.

The app also offers scientifically validated assessment tools to enable users to objectively measure their mental wellbeing. In addition, a gamified tracking tool lets them document and monitor the progress they are making on their personal mental-health journey.

Evidence-based content library

A library of evidence-based content, based on key themes from dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) and positive psychology, is available to app users who can then participate in supporting activities designed to help them enhance their life skills.

The Panda app also allows users to book up to seven 30-minute text-based chat sessions with mental health professionals over a period of 14 days. Future functionality will allow users to book 1:1 sessions with mental-health professionals who host sessions in the Bamboo Forest or who are listed in the marketplace section of the app.

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Pandemic-driven crisis

According to Sweidan, while South Africa has been experiencing a mental-health crisis since long before Covid-19, the pandemic exacerbated the situation. This has raised the urgency with which mental-health support needs to be provided to increasing numbers of South Africans.

"While Covid-19 has had a catastrophic impact on the physical wellbeing of millions of people around the world, the pandemic has also taken a hugely significant toll on people's mental health. Panda was conceived and developed as a viable way of responding to this growing mental-health crisis at scale, not only through the digital delivery of support and information, but also by helping to destigmatise mental issues," Sweidan says.

Growing popularity of digital interventions

Lits agrees, and says that while the pandemic has increased the incidence of mental illness, it has also increased society's use and acceptance of digital interventions, which has paved the way for apps like Panda to have a significant positive impact.

"In my time with Uber, I had first-hand experience of the massively positive impact technology can have on an industry, the

economy, and most importantly, on the lives of individuals and families," he says, "and I am confident that Panda has the potential to deliver the same positive impacts, on the mental health industry as a whole and in the lives of millions of people experiencing mental-health challenges."

The Panda app is available on the Apple and Android app stores. Search for 'Join Panda' to download it and register for free.