

Trauma exacerbates physical, mental disorders

The University of Cape Town study, using data from the South African Stress and Health Study (SASH), found that exposure to trauma had a direct link to arthritis, cardiovascular and respiratory disease, chronic pain and mental illness such as anxiety.



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Research leader Lukoye Atwoli, associate UCT Professor and Dean of the School of Medicine at Moi University, said, "My research... for the first time, demonstrates a link between trauma exposure and physical health in an African context. I hope my findings will be used in designing interventions for trauma survivors..."

The research found the most common trauma causing events were related to the unexpected death of a loved one and witnessing a traumatic event occurring to someone else. Based on the study, Atwoli recommended that interventions for trauma survivors should include witnesses of traumatic events.

Data from the SASH survey, used in the UCT study, showed that among South Africans:

- One in three have mental disorders lasting between 12 months and a lifetime
- The most prevalent disorder is anxiety (15.8%), then substance abuse (13.3%) and mood disorders (9.8%)
- 11% have two or more mental disorders

Pharmacist, and Integrative medicines expert, Felicia Rubin, says South Africans experience high rates of trauma and anxiety and noted that a 2013 study ranked SA second most stressed among 74 countries. Rubin advises trauma sufferers or those with anxiety should consult a medical professional or mental health expert immediately.

She also advises a healthy lifestyle to avoid or address anxiety and recommends the following:

- Reducing intake of excess sugar and avoiding stimulants such as fizzy drinks and coffee.
 - Consistent exercise.
 - Share emotions with close friends and family.
 - Practice mindfulness.
 - Join a support group if you have suffered trauma.
 - For mild anxiety and shock, seek relief from natural products such as Stillcalm, which utilises the indigenous herb sceletium

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