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Young adolescents in the Western Cape show alarming signs of depression and anxiety – study finds

A groundbreaking study by the [Alan J. Flisher Centre for Public Mental Health](#) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has shed light on the mental health landscape faced by adolescents aged 10 to 14 in the Western Cape. The study – conducted by Mirriam Mkhize, Associate Professor Claire van der Westhuizen and Professor Katherine Sorsdahl – forms part of a larger programme funded by the Sue Struengmann Initiative dedicated to addressing the mental health needs of young adolescents in school settings.

The study, titled "[Prevalence and factors associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety among young school-going adolescents in the Western Cape Province of South Africa](#)", was published in *Comprehensive Psychiatry*. It underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to support adolescent mental well-being.

Mkhize said worldwide, adolescents are significantly impacted by mental health conditions, with an estimated 10 to 20% experiencing conditions like depression or anxiety. However, studies on this topic are sparse in Africa, particularly among adolescents aged 10 to 14, leaving a critical gap in understanding and addressing mental health challenges in this demographic. This knowledge gap, coupled with the scarcity of mental health services in low- and middle-income countries, results in many adolescents' mental health conditions being undiagnosed and untreated, further exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

Conducted in collaboration with community-based organisations offering psychosocial support and counselling in under-resourced areas of the Western Cape, the study collected data from 621 adolescents aged 10 to 14 in 10 primary schools. Utilising tablet-based surveys, researchers gathered information on sociodemographic factors, depression, anxiety, and other psychosocial measures.

The study found that 33% of young adolescents reported experiencing symptoms of depression, while 21% reported symptoms of anxiety. While these symptoms do not necessarily indicate a formal diagnosis, Mkhize said the prevalence of such symptoms was concerning.

The variables significantly associated with depressive symptoms included being in a higher grade in school, alcohol use, the use of other drugs, and witnessing violence among adults at home. For anxiety symptoms, significant associations were found with being in a higher school grade, poor emotional regulation skills, and cannabis use.

Commenting on the findings, Mkhize said: "These results highlight the urgent need for comprehensive mental health support for young adolescents in school settings. By addressing the underlying risk factors identified in our study, we can work towards creating a healthier and more supportive environment for adolescents to thrive."

"The study's publication marks a significant step forward in understanding and addressing the mental health needs of school-going adolescents. Moving forward, concerted efforts are needed to implement evidence-based interventions that prioritise the mental well-being of adolescents in South Africa and beyond," concluded Mkhize.

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