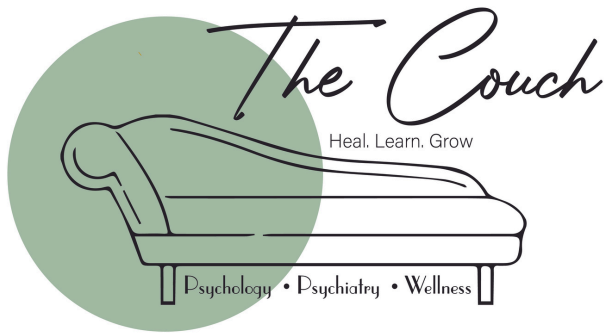




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THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH DAYS

"Work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back. The other four balls – family, health, friends, integrity – are made of glass. If you drop one of these, it will be irrevocably scuffed, nicked, perhaps even shattered."

- Gary Keller

In today's fast-paced life, slowing down to take a break for your mental well-being is more than just important – it is essential. Mental health days offer you a moment of pause so that you can take a quick break and reset. While often overlooked or misunderstood, mental health days are crucial for maintaining overall emotional balance. By recognizing their importance, we can transform the way we approach work and self-care, and ultimately equip ourselves to lead more balanced lives.

What are mental health days?

A mental health day is intentional limited time away from your usual responsibilities where you minimize any commitments with the goal of alleviating stress and focusing on restoring mental and emotional balance. Despite the term "day", mental health days are not limited to a single 24-hour period. They can range from a few hours to several months, depending on individual needs. The key is to take enough time to experience the benefits of a break from daily stressors while avoiding an extended absence that could lead to other challenges.

When to take a mental health day

Being able to recognize the need for a mental health day is key to managing stress, preventing burnout and maintaining overall well-being. Signs that you may need a mental health day include difficulty

sleeping, increased irritability, persistent fatigue, loss of motivation, and emotional overwhelm.

Benefits of mental health days

Mental health days present numerous benefits as they allow for a recharge and refocus of both the brain and body. This break helps to prevent burnout, boost productivity, improve morale and attitude, and even enhance well-being. However, this is only truly achieved when a mental health day is used to engage in activities that genuinely restore your energy. Such activities could include spending time on hobbies, practising mindfulness, engaging in physical activity, or simply resting. It is essential to take this time to disengage from work-related activities.

Embracing the concept of mental health days does more than help combat burnout and boost efficiency; it fosters a culture where well-being is prioritized. Remember, taking time for yourself isn't a luxury—it's a necessary practice for leading a balanced and fulfilling life.

by Kirsten Mynhardt
(Psychology Honours student UP)

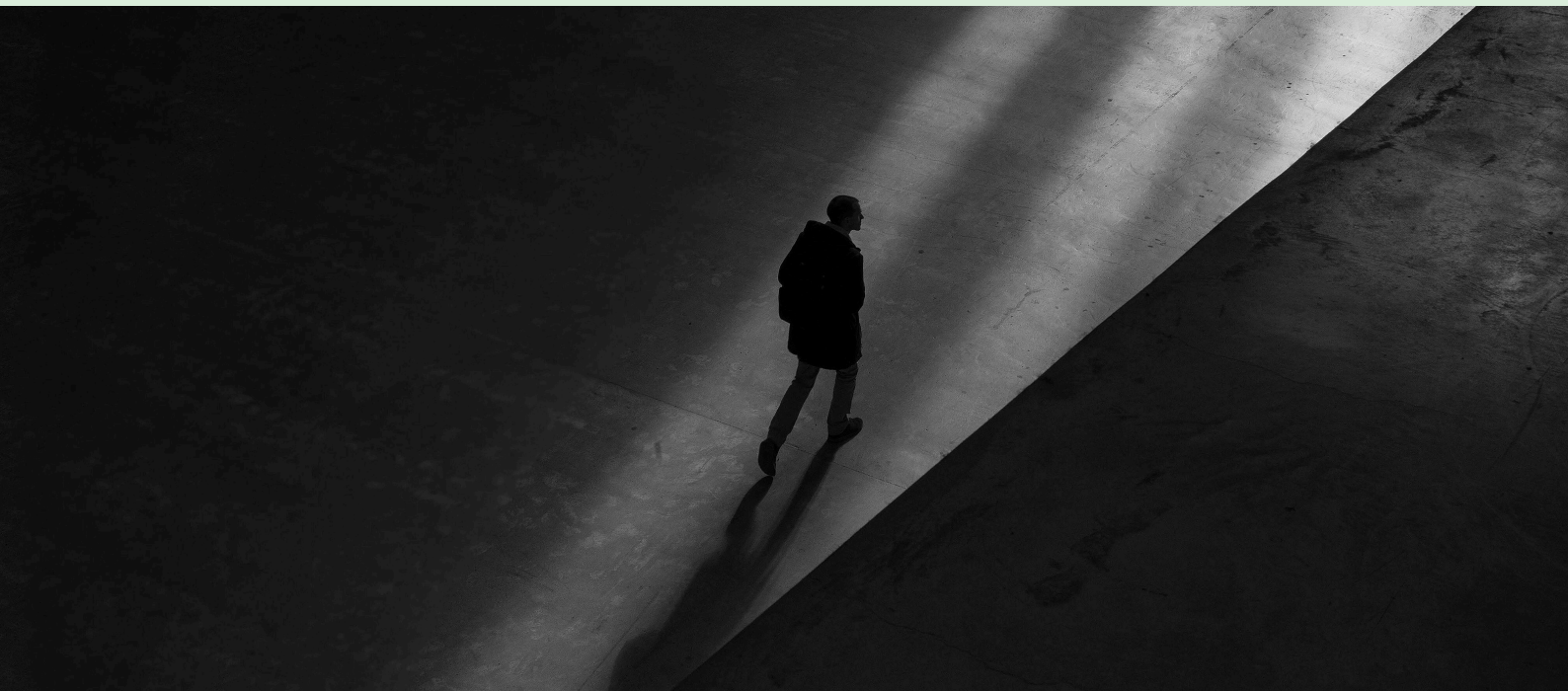
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The Hidden Battle

Why Mental Health Struggles Feel So Lonely

By Kholofelo Mashaba



How often have we convinced ourselves that nobody else can understand our battles with mental health? During difficult times, it can certainly feel that way. We struggle to accept that others may be going through what we are going through or have gone through it. We may isolate ourselves from others by believing that we are alone in our struggles. But that could not be further from the truth. Have you ever spoken to someone openly about your struggles (not with your therapist), and they just get it? You both laugh, and end off the conversation by saying “It is what it is”. They get it because they too have gone through it. Whatever it is.

When we struggle with mental health, we may experience loneliness (Marcotte et al., 2021). In this regard, loneliness can be described as “a feeling of isolation and disconnection from others, and is robustly associated with an increased

risk of negative affective conditions” (Marcotte et al., 2021). This pervasive feeling of loneliness may stem from a combination of emotional, psychological and social factors that have been linked to various negative mental health outcomes, and it may either exacerbate or trigger a mental health condition or it may be a response to a mental health condition (Mental Health America, n.d.). With mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety, you may experience common symptoms such as social withdrawal and self-isolation (Marcotte et al., 2021). These symptoms are self-perpetuating, leading you to lose your social support and further worsening your symptoms as you isolate yourself from others (Mental Health America, n.d.). This bidirectional relationship between mental health conditions and loneliness is cyclical in nature (GOV.UK, 2022).

Feeling misunderstood by loved ones or society can prevent you from seeking the support you need (GOV.UK, 2022). During these times, we may struggle to open up due to the fear of being judged or not wanting to feel like a burden to others (GOV.UK, 2022). Not reaching out for a helping hand may also stem from an internalised stigma that your mental health struggles are “not that deep” or not worth concern (GOV.UK, 2022). Indeed, you may have convinced yourself that whatever it is that you are going through is unique to you and only you, and that those closest to you would not be able to understand. This further isolates us from others, and worsens the already deep sense of loneliness we may feel (GOV.UK, 2022).

In the thick of our struggles, it can feel as though we are surrounded by others, yet still disconnected from them (Birken et al., 2023). This disconnect may result from feeling a lack of support from those closest to us, withdrawing from social events or hanging out with our friends, not feeling like we can open up about what is going on, or not having anyone you feel safe enough with to do so (GOV.UK, 2022). The lack of a quality connection with others and meaningful relationships keeps us further away from possible support, which isolates us and promotes feelings of loneliness (GOV.UK, 2022).

In moments of struggle, loneliness can feel suffocating. We think that nobody else would be able to get it, and that it is better to keep how we feel to ourselves. We do not want to burden others with our struggles, or we may feel like there is not anything worth divulging. Thinking this way only worsens our mental health and make us feel even more alone.

Remember, no matter how isolated you feel, there is always a safe space where you can find connection and understanding.

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The Paradox of Peace

“The paradox of peace lies in the paradox of the human condition—that we are capable of great love and great cruelty, that we are always a mix of some amount of ability and vulnerability. To achieve peace, we often have to fight for it.” Joe Underhill



On September 21st, we celebrate World Peace Day, a moment to reflect on the achievements of global harmony. Theoretically, we have made significant progress, such as the promotion of democracy and equality; however, a critical question remains: do these ideals manifest in reality? We continue to confront pressing issues, including human rights violations, environmental degradation, and persistent inequality. Thus, we find ourselves living in a paradox of peace.

The United Nations (UN) is an institution dedicated to fostering global harmony. Its key objectives include:

- Addressing the root causes of conflict through diplomacy, dialogue, and early intervention.
- Ensuring that fundamental freedoms and rights are upheld, with a focus on eliminating discrimination, injustice, and inequality.
- The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the necessity of creating equitable societies where resources are shared fairly, and everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Despite these objectives, many individuals assert that the UN's goals do not reflect their lived reality. Peace—defined as tolerance, pluralism, respect, and non-violent conflict resolution—remains an aspiration for more than 1.8 billion people living in conflict-affected and fragile states. These individuals confront persistent conflicts, inequality, injustice, and environmental degradation daily.

Nevertheless, there are positive developments to consider. Global connectivity technology facilitates real-time communication and collaboration across borders, fostering a sense of global community and enhancing peacebuilding efforts. Increased awareness through greater access to information and education raises awareness about human rights, social justice, and environmental issues, encouraging collective action for peace. We truly inhabit a paradox of peace.

To advance our pursuit of peace, we must:

- Develop policies that promote addressing injustice and inequality.
- Combat climate change and promote sustainable practices are critical.
- Engage in fair trade, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive development. Thus, we can reduce tensions and create a more stable foundation for peace.

On this World Peace Day, let us acknowledge the problems and obstacles we have to overcome in order to achieve world peace. The search for peace is a never-ending quest that calls for cooperation, compassion, and fortitude. We can get closer to a world where everyone lives in peace. It's not just an ideal. We can achieve this by accepting the complexity of peace and working to overcome its obstacles.

-Mbalenhle Dlamini

The Role of Fathers in Parent-Infant Psychotherapy: Supporting the Mother-Infant Dyad

By Paige Stroucken (Clinical psychologist at Couch & Co)

Parent-Infant Psychotherapy (PIP) is a therapeutic approach designed to support the emotional development of infants by strengthening the relationship between the parent and the child. The early months and years of life are critical for a child's emotional well-being, and PIP focuses on understanding the challenges that can arise in the caregiving relationship. PIP has traditionally aimed to strengthen the mother-infant bond, but recent research and practice have highlighted the increasingly recognized role of fathers in the mother-infant dyad. In modern family systems, the father's involvement is not only central to the emotional and psychological development of the infant but also crucial in supporting the mother's mental health, which directly impacts the child's early experiences and attachment formation. As we deepen our understanding of family dynamics, it becomes essential to appreciate the nuanced role fathers play in fostering a healthy parent-infant relationship, especially within the framework of PIP.

For many years, attachment theory has centered on the mother-child relationship, given that mothers are typically the primary caregivers in early infancy. However, fathers' influence on infant mental health and the overall emotional climate of the household has become a growing area of interest in both clinical practice and research. Fathers are now recognized as essential figures whose emotional availability, responsiveness, and supportiveness shape not only the child's attachment but also the psychological well-being of the mother, especially during the challenging postpartum period.

One of the most significant contributions a father makes in the context of PIP is by providing emotional and practical support to the mother. During pregnancy and postpartum, mothers are highly vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and postpartum depression. These mental health challenges can disrupt the mother's ability to attune to her infant's emotional needs, which is vital for fostering secure attachment. Research has shown that the presence of a supportive, engaged father can mitigate the impact of these mental health issues. Fathers who are emotionally available and actively involved in caregiving create a buffer for maternal stress, reducing its adverse effects on both the mother and infant.

Fathers also play a direct role in shaping the infant's emotional and social development. While the traditional view often relegates fathers to secondary caregivers, their interactions with their child are uniquely valuable. Fathers often engage in more physically stimulating and playful interactions with their infants, which fosters exploration and independence. These playful, dynamic interactions contribute to the infant's ability to navigate different emotional states and build resilience, offering a complementary attachment style to the more nurturing and protective role often associated with mothers. Through their distinctive style of engagement, fathers enhance the infants' capacity for emotional regulation and adaptability, critical components of healthy mental development.

In the context of PIP, incorporating fathers into the therapeutic process has clear benefits. When fathers are included in therapy sessions, it not only strengthens the mother-infant bond but also facilitates co-parenting, which is essential for creating a stable emotional environment for the infant. A father's participation in PIP helps him become more attuned to both the infant's and mother's emotional needs, fostering a more cohesive family unit. This approach is especially important when the mother struggles with mental health issues such as depression or anxiety, as fathers can take on the role of stabilizer within the family. By working collaboratively with both parents, therapists can encourage a shared understanding of the infant's needs and promote synchronized caregiving.

Furthermore, fathers who are engaged in the PIP process are better equipped to recognize their own emotional experiences, including the challenges they face in adjusting to fatherhood. Often overlooked in discussions of early parenthood, fathers too experience significant shifts in identity and emotional state during this period. PIP provides a space for fathers to reflect on their own upbringing, emotional availability, and responses to the needs of their children. This reflective process helps fathers develop what is known as reflective functioning, or the ability to understand their children's mental states and respond appropriately, which is crucial in fostering secure attachment. Reflective functioning is particularly important in co-parenting dynamics, where both parents must be attuned not only to their child but also to each other's emotional and mental states.

A key aspect of integrating fathers into PIP is recognizing that fathers often face different societal and psychological pressures than mothers. Cultural expectations may position fathers as less involved in the emotional care of their children, focusing more on the provider role. These expectations can create barriers to paternal involvement in early caregiving and therapy. In response, therapists working within the PIP model must actively engage fathers by validating their importance in the caregiving process and encouraging emotional openness. Normalizing the emotional and psychological adjustments that come with fatherhood is essential to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for both parents.

It is also critical to address the relational dynamics between mothers and fathers in therapy, as these directly impact the infant's emotional environment. Healthy communication between parents and the ability to co-regulate each other's stress levels are vital for a child's sense of security. PIP offers a platform for both parents to explore how they can support one another in their parenting roles. When fathers provide consistent emotional support, mothers are better able to engage with their infants in ways that promote secure attachment. This shared responsibility not only alleviates the pressure on mothers but also ensures that infants benefit from the emotional resources of both parents.

In sum, Parent-Infant Psychotherapy offers a unique opportunity to strengthen the mother-infant bond by integrating fathers into the therapeutic process. Fathers' roles extend beyond being secondary caregivers; they are key figures in promoting maternal mental health, contributing directly to infant mental health, and fostering secure attachment. By recognizing the importance of father involvement and encouraging both parents to engage in reflective functioning, PIP can create a more holistic approach to early intervention. This integration of fathers into the therapeutic framework not only enhances the infant's emotional and social development but also fosters a more resilient and connected family system.

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PARKINSON'S DISEASE

Kiara Govender | Psychology HONS student (WITS)



Parkinson's disease

is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that primarily affects movement, characterised by motor and non-motor symptoms. This academic article provides an overview of Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's disease is the second most common neurodegenerative disorder after Alzheimer's disease, affecting approximately 1-2% of individuals over the age of 60 worldwide. The prevalence increases with age, with most cases diagnosed in individuals over 50 years of age. Men are slightly more likely to develop Parkinson's disease than women.

Parkinson's disease is characterised by the progressive loss of dopaminergic neurons in a specific region of the brain. The accumulation of abnormal protein aggregates contributes to neuronal dysfunction and cell death. Dopamine depletion leads to motor symptoms..

Common motor symptoms include tremors (involuntary shaking), bradykinesia (slow movement and difficulty initiating voluntary actions), muscle rigidity (stiffness) and postural instability (impaired balance). Non-motor symptoms include cognitive impairment, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, autonomic dysfunction, and sensory symptoms.

There is no cure for Parkinson's disease, but treatment aims to alleviate symptoms, improve quality of life, and slow disease progression. Surgical interventions like Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) may be considered for patients with advanced Parkinson's disease who are not adequately controlled with medication alone.

Parkinson's disease is a complex neurological disorder with diverse clinical manifestations and significant implications for patients' lives. Ongoing research into disease mechanisms, genetic factors, biomarkers, and novel therapeutic approaches is crucial for improving diagnosis, treatment outcomes, and ultimately finding a cure for this debilitating condition.

CREATING HOPE: HOW CONVERSATIONS CAN PREVENT SUICIDE

Suicide is a significant public health concern, affecting individuals, families, and communities worldwide. During Suicide Awareness Month, it is crucial to emphasize the power of conversations in creating hope and preventing suicide. Open dialogues about mental health can foster understanding, reduce stigma, and encourage individuals to seek help.

WHAT'S THE ROLE OF OPEN COMMUNICATION?

Open communication is vital in addressing the complexities of mental health issues. When individuals feel comfortable discussing their feelings, they are more likely to express distress and seek help. Encouraging conversations about mental health can lead to:

- **Increased Awareness.** Talking about suicide helps to normalize discussions around mental health, making it easier for individuals to share their struggles without fear of judgment.
- **Support Networks.** Conversations can strengthen social connections, providing individuals with a support system that can help them navigate difficult times. Knowing that someone cares can make a significant difference in a person's willingness to reach out for help.
- **Identification of Warning Signs.** Engaging in dialogue allows friends and family to recognize warning signs of suicidal thoughts or behaviors, enabling timely intervention.



STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

To foster meaningful discussions about suicide prevention, consider the following strategies:

- **Ask Open-ended Questions.** Encourage individuals to share their feelings by asking questions that require more than a yes or no answer. For example, "How have you been feeling lately?"
- **Practise Active Listening.** Show genuine interest in what the other person is saying. Nodding, maintaining eye contact, and reflecting back what they say can demonstrate your support.
- **Be Non-judgmental.** Create a safe space for sharing by withholding judgment and validating their feelings. Let them know that it's okay to feel overwhelmed or distressed.
- **Encourage Professional Help.** If someone expresses suicidal thoughts or severe distress, encourage them to seek professional help from a mental health provider.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement plays a crucial role in suicide prevention by fostering resilience among individuals at risk. By creating supportive environments where people feel connected and valued, communities can significantly reduce feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Initiatives such as peer support groups, community workshops on mental health awareness, and educational programs can empower individuals with coping skills and resources. Furthermore, promoting social connectedness through shared activities helps build strong relationships that act as protective factors against suicide risk. When communities come together to support one another, they create an atmosphere of hope and belonging that can make all the difference in someone's life.

By creating an environment where conversations about mental health are welcomed and encouraged, we can foster hope and resilience within our communities. Remember that every conversation counts; it could be the lifeline someone needs.

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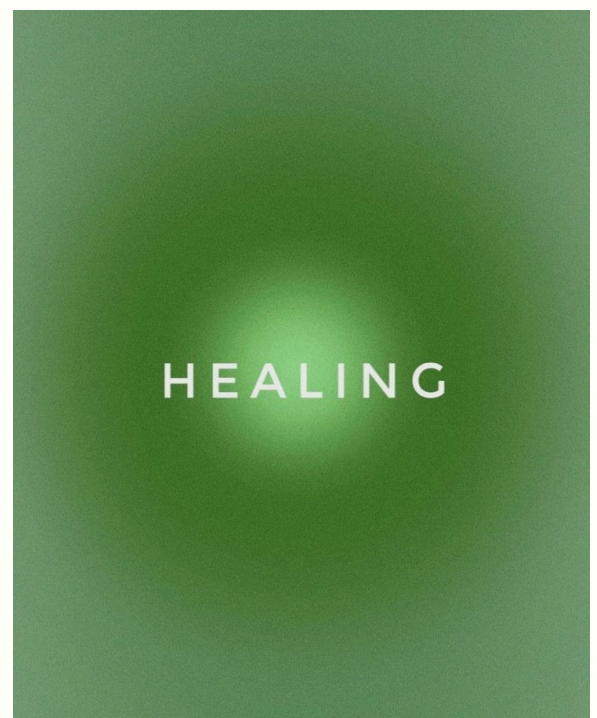
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Thank you for being a part of our Couch Community. Stay tuned for our next newsletter - the October edition of the Psychology Couch Newsletter.

Until next time, as always, our wish for you is to heal, learn and grow.

Get involved and stay in touch via our social media platforms:

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