



CORONAVIRUS UPDATE

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LOCKED DOWN TODAY, COGNITIVELY DISSONANT ABOUT TOMORROW?

*FINDINGS FROM THE COVID-19 SURVEY OF ONLINE
SADAG COMMUNITY MEMBERS*

FEELINGS ABOUT THE LOCKDOWN: 'IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO'?

Over 13 days, in the middle of the Covid-19 Lockdown period, 1214 members of the SADAG online community reflected on their experiences, their mental health and their financial fears. Nine out of ten supported the Lockdown to stop the spread of Covid-19, protect the immuno-compromised, and ensure that our strained South African health care system would not collapse under the weight of infection. While most of the survey respondents felt that the Covid-19 Lockdown was 'the right thing to do', others qualified their support by expressing

more balanced views, stating: 'Yes [I support the Lockdown] to flatten the curve, but no for the economy'. Simply put, the Lockdown was seen as the 'lesser of two evils'. Of the one in ten who opposed the lockdown, mental health and economic concerns dominated, with one respondent stating: 'it's just prolonging the inevitable. It's purely buying time. It's depressing the economy. It's too harsh. It's isolating'.

LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN: ANXIETY, PANIC AND FINANCIAL STRESS

Without question, each person surveyed had reacted to the experience of being locked

down, albeit in interesting and differently challenging ways. Anxiety and panic topped the

*I ... am worried about my husband's stress as he may lose his family business and can't pay staff – Survey respondent Anne**

list at 55%, closely followed by financial stress and pressure at 46%. Depression (40%) and

poor family relations (30%) were both quite commonly reported. These challenges are not faced in isolation. If the Lockdown is the lesser of two evils, then the mental health impact may unleash additional challenges. This is clearly seen in the statistically significant connections identified between anxiety and depression. SADAG community members who had previously been diagnosed with generalised anxiety, or OCD, struggled with depression during the Lockdown ($p < 0.001$, $p < 0.05$). This reminds us of the depression-anxiety continuum and the fact that the Lockdown can do more than merely exacerbate one existing condition. Mental disorders are complex, interlocking, and tricky to treat under the best of conditions. A commonly experienced stressor can often unmask cracks not visible at other junctures.

The economic impact of the Lockdown will be felt in the months to come. However, there is strong evidence of a present and painful degree of financial stress and pressure. With 62% of the sample gainfully employed, and 74% reporting current medical membership, this appears to be an economically privileged South African community. In spite of this, nearly one in two people reported feeling financial stress, and this particular stress was not statistically connected to employment status. In other words, no matter whether someone was employed or unemployed, both groups reported economic and financial pressure. Who was feeling the financial pressure the most intensely? People aged 26-35, or those that had begun to work most recently and had likely not built up a large savings or investment-based economic safety net. Existing medical aid members in the sample are ironically more likely than non-members to report experiencing financial stress and pressure. As such, even those with a medical aid, as a safety net of sorts, understood that not all nets are safe, perhaps fearing the loss of this membership after the Lockdown.

A RECIPE FOR COGNITIVE DISSONANCE?

Baking a cognitive dissonance

cake is simple. Take two beliefs,

Cognitive dissonance refers to the state of discomfort that results from the tension caused by holding contradictory beliefs, or performing contradictory actions (Festinger 1957)

strengthen, mix and attempt to stop the oil and water from making a natural separation. When the mixture fails to bind together, you begin to feel awful and may decide that the cake is not worth making after all. Or, take the belief that the Lockdown is 'the right thing to do', strengthen it with science and fear, before adding the very real worry about your financial well-being to the mix, and cognitive dissonance is a natural result. The Lockdown has a real impact on

personal earnings but worrying about money seems to place value on livelihoods over lives. The stress that results from this tension can have profound consequences. We may think that high levels of anxiety, panic and depression, reported in this study, are all directly linked to the experience of life under the Lockdown. The reality is that the true home of these negative mental states is found in the land imagined after the Lockdown. It may be that people believe when the Lockdown is over, skies are greyish blue? However, the cognitive dissonance in evidence may not be entirely due to the Lockdown. Further analysis suggests that people already diagnosed with Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Depression and OCD are all prone to financial stress and worry, in ways that clients previously diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and Personality Disorders are not.

DEALING WITH THE DISSONANCE

A preoccupation with life after the Lockdown may be shaping



Q: What has SADAG done to help you during the Lockdown?

A: I see a lot of comments and content [on the SADAG Facebook chats]. Which reminds me that I am not alone. Even though I feel extremely lonely and stressed - Survey respondent, Rebecca*

a dissonant life within the Lockdown period. What is to be done? The answer seems to lie on the old South African expression: *local is lekker*. Survey respondents who experienced stress due to monetary concerns, were less likely to seek out Covid-19 updates from the press/media and social media. Rather, they demonstrated a preference for local, community-based WhatsApp groups and the news they would bring. Sticking close to home, and feeling the cognitive-dissonance inspired anxiety, these respondents tended to do domestic chores to feel better.

Q: What has SADAG done to help you during the Lockdown?

A: Staying running. Knowing they're there if I need [them] – Survey Respondent Leoni*

Generally, those worried about matters financial did not seek to communicate with others in any particular way. This said, a number did consider reaching out to SADAG, or had done so with gratifying success. The SADAG daily chat innovation on Facebook was appreciated by many, including those who did not report feeling financial pressure. However, as the financially



stressed grouping were hardest to reach via social media platforms, this sentiment may indicate SADAG's ability to become part of a trusted local milieu. For example, a respondent illustrated this by noting: 'I use the [SADAG] number when I do community posts for people to contact. I know it is trustworthy which is helpful'.

From providing online self-help tips to a caring ear, SADAG offers respectful support while we await the reality of life after Lockdown, a reality that seems to trouble so many living through it. Sometimes just knowing that SADAG is there has proven helpful to many of the people surveyed, and especially to those who have become more worried about money than anything else.

This research has shown that it is not simply a case of two external 'evils', of losing lives versus losing the economic health of a country. It is also a matter of inner conflict, between dissonant ideals, and this conflict places the power into the hands of individuals.

For those of us not on the medical frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic, these research findings

Q: What has SADAG done to help you during the Lockdown?

A: I feel like there is someone there that cares. That there [are] people we can speak to who doesn't judge but helps – Survey respondent Maria*

are a reminder that we all live on the frontline of our own mental health realities. The virus has had an impact, as does the Lockdown in response to this threat. With many of us taking a place on the depression-anxiety continuum, caused by financial pressure and cognitive dissonance, a chance to be part of creating the "new normal" may provide a sense of hope and purpose.

*These are not their real names

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References available upon request

SADAG Online Survey on COVID-19 Lockdown and Mental Health

In an effort to combat the spread of Covid-19, the South African government announced a lockdown to commence on 26 March 2020. Given this historic and unprecedented occurrence, SADAG wanted to investigate SADAG community members' experiences, their specific needs and how to best shape SADAG's responses. All members of the SADAG online community were invited to participate in an online survey that ran from 2-15 April 2020. **A total of 1214 responses were received.**

HOME LIFE

16% LIVE ALONE 
47% LIVE WITH OTHERS

TIME SPENT OUTSIDE DURING LOCKDOWN

46%  HOUR OR LESS

74%  HOURS OR LESS

BIOLOGICAL SEX

85%  **15%** 
WOMEN MEN

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

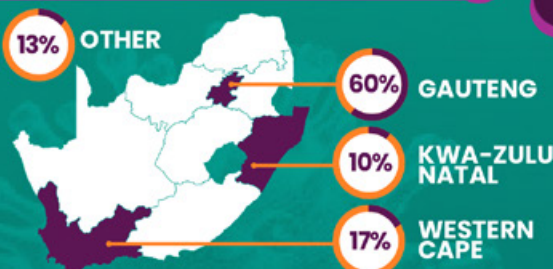
62%  **38%** 
EMPLOYED UNEMPLOYED

AGE

17% 18-25 **27%** 26-35

21% 36-45 **35%** 46+

LOCATION OF PARTICIPANTS



GENERAL VIEW ON LOCKDOWN

FELT STRESSED / VERY STRESSED BEFORE THE LOCKDOWN
59%

65%
FELT STRESSED / VERY STRESSED DURING THE LOCKDOWN

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES DIAGNOSED PRIOR TO LOCKDOWN

59% • DIAGNOSED WITH MH PRIOR TO LOCKDOWN

DEPRESSION • **46%**


30% • GENERALIZED ANXIETY

BIPOLAR • **12%**

MAIN CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED DURING THE LOCKDOWN



VIEWS ON SADAG DAILY FACEBOOK CHAT

 **55%** have heard of daily Facebook chat

MOST COMMON CHANNELS FOR SEEKING HELP FROM SADAG

 SADAG WEBSITE **43%**  SOCIAL MEDIA **42%**  SADAG HELPLINES **16%**

MAIN SOURCES OF INFORMATION REGARDING COVID-19 DURING LOCKDOWN



WHAT ACTIVITIES HELPED PEOPLE FEEL BETTER DURING THE LOCKDOWN?



COPING TIPS - MAIN SOURCES



 www@sadag.org
 zane@sadag.org  @theSADAG
 The South African Depression & Anxiety Group

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0800 21 22 23
0800 456 789

