Substance abuse in North West under spotlight

RUSTENBURG - The high number of people who are out of work, currently 24.7% in South Africa is one of the world’s largest welfare states which creates not only a financial burden but a psychological one too. And it is this psychology of the unemployed that can add to the use of alcoholism.

“People who are unemployed, feel desperate and stressed about not earning an income”, says William, the leader from the Rustenburg Support Group. “This depression and pain tempts them to take drugs to take away the pain.” In the North West, like in many regions of the country, unemployment and substance abuse are closely linked. “People often don’t recognise the signs of depression or they try to self-medicate stress with alcohol or drugs”, says SADAG’s Naazia Ismail. The cycle becomes a vicious one - having no hope for a brighter future, trying to get through one day at a time, and falling into addiction.

“I work in an organisation where I am exposed to substance addiction every day”, says William. “That’s why I was motivated to do something to help.” Eva, who runs the group in Klerksdorp, had a similar reason for starting her Support Group. “People turn to bad habits like substance abuse when they are unemployed and feel scared and alone - a support group helps them know they are not alone and helps them get share problems and talk to others who have been through a similar problem. Most of our groups have between 10 and 15 members.”

There has been a call to communities to act from grassroots level and do something tangible in communities to positively impact on those in need. SADAG’s Support Group programme is one such project. It’s often hard for sufferers and their loved ones to discuss substance abuse issues or get support. In disadvantaged areas, where unemployment is high, information, resources and psychological treatment is often severely lacking. By training community members to start and run Support Groups, places of hope and help are created and sustained. “Just knowing that there are many other addicts who want help is important”, says William. “It gives hope and shows people that there’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Eva says that she feels she is doing her part for the health of Klerksdorp. “By educating people about the dangers of substance abuse, and giving them alternatives we can hopefully change the pattern”, she says. Intervening and encouraging people to stop bad habits is empowering for the Support Groups leaders as well as their members.

While sadly families don’t always support their loved one’s substances abuse because of anger, stigma and misunderstanding, people can find that support in the group. “Within the group, people share and support each other. They help each other through the hard times” And with the formation of support groups, comes a community voice that can share, educate and support all. Eva hopes that through empowering of the group, the effects are duplicated on their friends, neighbours, and families. There is a generally new idea about the benefits of looking at stopping substances and how to stay sober. “Members are desperate to get out of this cycle of addiction and are so grateful for any information that can help them do that.”

A group of people, who meet regularly, who share a common issue, and are committed to helping each other and themselves achieve their goals through sharing experiencing, advice and support is a powerful thing. “Support Groups are generally run for patients by patients, and they create a collective wisdom and strength, and really help each other through the tough times”, says Ismail. The North West Groups have the support of clinics, social workers and the police - which makes them an even more powerful community voice, “Clinics refer patients to the group for support and the community knows that they are safe when they come to a meeting.”

SADAG has over 200 Support Groups working across the country and is running workshops to train community members to start these vital groups. In the North West there are currently groups in Klerksdorp, Potchefstroom, Brits, Rustenburg and Lichtenberg.

Through these groups, all people have access to information, answers, and help. Sitting and sharing with a group of people who’ve been where you are, who have learnt coping skills and life lessons, breaks through isolation and allows the human contact and compassion we all need. Get in touch with a Support Group - or start your own - by calling SADAG on 0800 12 13 14 or 0800 21 22 23. Please ask for Naazia.