

SADAG'S "YOUR LIFE DURING LOAD SHEDDING" SURVEY RESULTS (2023)

1836
PARTICIPANTS



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SADAG's New Load Shedding Survey Results sheds some light on the impact on Mental Health in South Africa

Just after Eskom's long term load shedding forecast in January, SADAG sent out an online survey to the over 30, 000 members of the SADAG community. A total of 1 836 respondents reflected on the ways that load shedding impacted their daily lives, their fears, their feelings and how they were managing to cope in this crisis. In a project led by Dr Bronwyn Dworzanowski-Venter (Senior Research Associate, Faculty of Humanities, UJ), SADAG was especially interested in uncovering specific pressure points that could lead to negative psychological and practical outcomes.

Feelings of helplessness were often reported, with one respondent sharing that load shedding **"has made me feel that I cease to exist, basically. My life feels it's at a standstill - What can I do? What must I do? I hate the feeling of pressure it puts on me..."**.

Alongside helplessness, employed survey respondents (74%) were expected to deliver work, despite outages, adding high levels of performance anxiety and work-related stress to heavy financial demands caused by the secondary impacts of load shedding (eg. food spoilage, appliance breakages, etc.).

The entire sample seemed psychologically impacted in one form or another. It is not surprising, then, that 4 in 10 people reported Depression, and 62% of people struggled with Anxiety and Panic, and some respondents reported an exacerbation of physical and psychological challenges. Others indicated a new set of psychological challenges, such as emergent anger and a new inability to emotionally regulate, with one respondent sharing, **“Feelings of helplessness, like the energy has been sucked out of you. Suddenly you become anxious and angry”**.

Worryingly, 1 in 10 have contemplated suicide or had thoughts of suicide: **“I just sat in the dark and cried myself to sleep and I am someone who is dealing with depression and suicidal thoughts”**.

Social relations between households were strained, 31% reported problematic family relationships, and feelings of isolation. Load shedding has reduced social interaction between homes and within homes, as people scramble to complete all tasks when there is power, they tend to collapse into separate spaces in the dark. People also fear crime, and so tend to stay in their dark homes, further reducing social coping.

For many respondents, the psychological impact was not due to power cuts themselves. Rather, distress was highest when power was not returned on promised time or when there was an unscheduled power cut. When 9 out of 10 people in the sample reported feeling worried when there is a non-scheduled power cut, and a further 91% raising the concern that power may likely not be returned for a long time (in the instance of an unscheduled interruption) – there is an anxious sense that the power system is strained and difficult to repair, even outside of load shedding times.

The survey showed that 96% feared that load shedding will cause long-term damage to the South African Economy, thus leaving many SA Citizens in a worse state than before. **“I am more prone to things that I never was before such as road rage, losing my temper”**.

How, then, have we been coping? Some people went along with the idea of suspended existence by sleeping (44%) or “numbing out” on their phones (16%) during load shedding slots. Others chose to respond to work pressure, trying to meet professional obligations during outages (32%). Some chose to take a pro-active break and perform wellness activities such as meditation, yoga or spending time in nature during scheduled power cuts (26%), and still others chose to exercise (20%).

Members of the SADAG community who showed the most resilience were those who had managed to plan effectively around load shedding schedules (10%), or who had the funds to erect solar alternatives (10%).

Some respondents refused to allow load shedding to get in the way of living, determined to “carry on as normal”, with or without an alternative power solution. Others claimed the load shedding gave opportunities for wellness activities, such as meditation, spending time in nature or reconnecting with family and friends. During load shedding we could simply “[take some] me time after [completing] household chores”, as one respondent stated.

The pro-active implementation of psychological coping strategies is an option open to all. This is the way to harness personal power and create a new normal on our own terms. We do not have to normalise life without stable electricity supply, but we can cope in ways that make us feel better. We can create our own light, be kind to ourselves, and employ the wisdom of a SADAG community member who said: **“I put my head torch on and do the best I can. We may not know when the power will return, but we can (and should) build our own insulation and frame the crisis on our own terms”**.

“We may not know when the power will return, or how to fix damage to the electrical, communications and water infrastructure, but we can and should build our own psychological insulation infrastructure and frame the crisis on our own terms,” says Dr Bronwyn Dworzanowski-Venter (Senior Research Associate, Faculty of Humanities, UJ).

As a result of these findings, SADAG is now better enabled to implement additional support and coping strategies and remind respondents that they are not alone. Many survey participants opted to reach out to SADAG by leaving their contact number at the end of the survey requesting for a counsellor to call them to help them further.

One of the important steps that SADAG is taking since the results, is reminding anyone who is struggling or not coping, that SADAG is still available. SADAG has various ways that you can speak to a counsellor – even despite load shedding, network issues and signal problems – there is always a way you can speak to a counsellor. **Call SADAG on one of the toll-free Helplines - 0800 567 567, 0800 456 789 or 0800 12 13 14 (24 hours), or sms 31393 and a counsellor will call you back, or chat to a Counsellor LIVE on WhatsApp Chatline on 076 882 2775 (8am to 5pm), or fill in a contact form on the website www.sadag.org**, which has lots of information and tools to help you cope with all mental health issues.

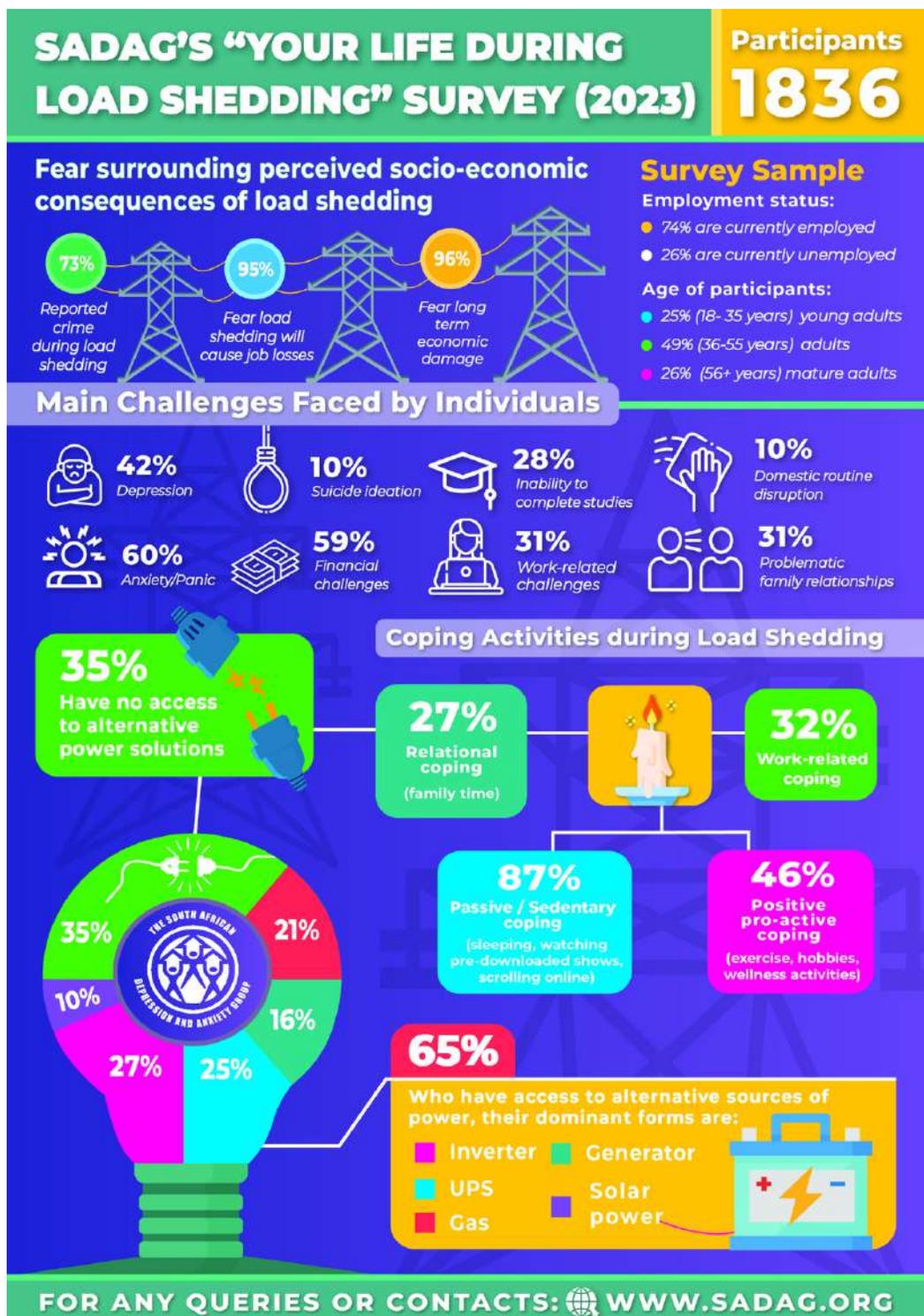
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