



SPOTLIGHT ON TUBERCULOSIS (TB)

The pandemic has highlighted the idea of a disease being front and centre in all aspects of our lives. However, for someone living with a chronic condition, this has been their reality long before COVID-19 came along, and the pandemic has simply made things worse.

World Tuberculosis Day is observed on 24 March, and in South Africa, the month of March is TB Awareness Month.

Economic, social and psychological distress is common amongst those living with chronic conditions, such as tuberculosis (TB). TB is one of the leading causes of death in South Africa, and it is also one of the biggest drivers of mental distress. A person suffering from TB may face more struggles in addition to their condition, as they may:

- not be able to work while they are recovering (sick leave)
- not be able to work from home
- find themselves unemployed
- have difficulty isolating at home
- be shunned by their community
- not be able to access the treatment necessary to manage their condition.

THE ROLE OF CHRONIC STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH IN DISEASE RISK, PARTICULARLY TUBERCULOSIS (TB)



We are living through stressful times. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it unprecedented levels of social, economic and mental stress, and no-one has been spared. If you haven't been directly affected by the virus itself, there has been some level of disruption to your employment, living arrangements, family dynamics or income. After nearly two years of living with these disruptions, change and uncertainty on a daily basis, the stress that is associated with them has become 'normal'. The truth is, this type of 'new normal', is anything but. Even though you may not feel heart-pounding, sweat-inducing worry – chronic, unabated stress can start to take a toll on your health – both physically and emotionally.

Research has found a strong link between TB and psychological distress, showing that up to 80% of patients with TB, experience mental health problems. However, this is bi-directional, which means that general mental distress, emotional turmoil and social isolation may be considered an important risk factor for developing TB.

Poor mental health and chronic stress deliver a devastating blow to the immune system. These conditions cause changes in the release and regulation of hormones, which impair the healthy function of the immune system, resulting in an increased risk of infections, chronic metabolic disease (e.g. diabetes) and even cancer. In the case of TB, a weakened immune system could also mean an increased risk of activation of latent TB (when a person has some TB bacteria within their body).

THE WAY FORWARD

There has been a lot of progress in the fight against TB, specifically with recent advances in the development of new vaccines and medications. While these developments are encouraging, it's important to take a holistic look at TB prevention and consider the important role that stress and mental health have in both the development of the disease, and the management of it.



Here are eight ways that you can contribute to lowering the TB burden in your community, and improve your own resilience to infection:

1. Become aware of your current stress levels and take a proactive approach to managing these. Regular exercise, meditation, engaging with others and spending time in nature can all be effective in easing stress levels.
2. Speak out when feeling overwhelmed, and if you experience mental health concerns, ensure that you seek treatment.
3. Maintain strong social ties to help buffer the negative effects of stress.
4. Live a healthy lifestyle – by eating well, exercising regularly and prioritising sleep, you give your immune system the best chance of keeping you healthy.
5. Act early – the sooner you can be diagnosed and treated; the more successful treatment will be.
6. Manage existing chronic conditions, like HIV and diabetes, and take your medication as prescribed.
7. Ensure that your children are vaccinated against TB.
8. If you have active TB, ensure that you continue to take your medication for the full duration of the treatment course, even if you start feeling better.

By practicing these basic principles, you can protect your health and everyone else around you.

References

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