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STRESSED OUT AND SEDATED? RESEARCH SURVEYING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

SUBSTANCE USE – WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

We know people around us are stressed and tired. We also know people use substances. A survey of generous members of the online SADAG community (n=262) tells us the usual tale of people in distress who may make use of one of the usual suspects, or substances to make it through the day. What are the substances that people assume may be bad for them, when used in excess, but are normatively acceptable and legal under conditions of moderate use? They are alcohol and tobacco products, used by 86% and 65% of our survey sample at least once in their lives. One in two people owned to tobacco use in the past three months, with one in three smoking daily. The recent legalisation of personal cannabis use allowed 55% of this survey sample to admit to the use of this substance, with one in ten having

used it in the past 90 days.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS?

Are smoking and drinking really seeing members of the SADAG community through? Substance use doesn't imply substance abuse, nor does it imply people are using substances to cope. What we can learn from this largely urban, fairly affluent multi-racial sample of adults tending towards middle age, across multiple race groups, is that it's possible for substance use and feelings of distress to co-exist. Intuitively and factually, we already know that the use of tobacco, alcohol and cannabis can be statistically associated with indicators contained in Kessler's 10-item Psychological Distress Scale. What we may not know is that the frequency of use of tobacco products is most closely associated with feelings of worthlessness,

while alcohol seems to be used more often by people experiencing nervousness. If hopelessness is the plague, then cannabis seems to be the preferred cure. Even though the sample is small, and we can't claim representivity for the 30 000 - 40 000 strong SADAG community made up of more and less active members, we can begin to see that these findings are in line with the 2012 National Survey of Drug Use (Peltzer and Phaswana-Mafuya 2018: 1).

SEDATIVE USE

Nearly half the people surveyed have made use of sedatives in the past 3 months, with 18% reporting daily usage. This daily usage figure is important for it's higher than the respective, daily alcohol and cannabis use reported. This is unusual as the 2012 National Survey indicated cannabis was used 10 times more often than sedatives across South

Africa in a 3 month period. Perhaps the intervening years will have brought change to this national picture.

STRESSED OUT AND SEDATED

Why are so many people using sedatives? The answer may lie in reported levels of distress. Just how stressed out are members of the SADAG community? Respondents were asked to reflect on various feelings that they would have experienced over the past 30 days. Nearly half reported feeling 'depressed' and that 'everything was too much effort'. Over a third felt 'hopeless', 'worthless', 'tired' and 'nervous'. A quarter owned to feeling unhappy and 'could not be cheered up'. These are all examples of people in distress, as is reflected in these high levels of agreement with multiple items taken from the Kessler's 10-item Psychological Distress Scale.

Of all the substances used in the past 90 days, sedatives were the most compellingly correlated with each of Kessler's distress items used in this survey ($p < 0.0001$ across all items). These all took the form of positive correlations, implying the greater the degree of perceived distress, the higher the frequency of sedative use. Feeling tired? Take a sedative. Feeling depressed? Some sedation could do. Restless? Nervous? Consider sedation. Is everything too much effort? Try sedation.

For the purposes of this study, Sedatives included: Sleeping tablets, Serapax, Rohypnol and Valium as core examples. This is in line with the WHO ASSIST (Alcohol, Smoking, and Substance Use Involvement Screening Test) screening tool that was used to assess broad substance use in the online SADAG community. However, Sedatives are not the only substances that can sedate a community.

SEDATIVES AND OPIOIDS – A BAD ROMANCE?

Weak to moderate positive correlations were found between frequency of sedative use in the past three months, and a number of other substances including: cocaine, amphetamines and opioids. Of these, the strongest positive correlation was between sedatives and opioids, indicating that when individuals increased the consumption of one of them, there was a concomitant increase in the use of the other. What's also interesting is the

frequency of reported opiate use is also positively correlated with all of Kessler's 10-item Psychological Distress Scale ($p < 0.05$ across all items). Same distress, similar solution? Sedatives and opiates could equally and effectively numb emotional pain.

Both legal and illegal opioids figured in this study, and it may be worthwhile to conduct further research into whether legal opiates, such as Codeine, are the specific substances correlated with sedative usage. Whether staying asleep or choosing to kill the pain, the surveyed members of the SADAG virtual realm may be coping in unhelpful ways. If the use of legal substances, such as sleeping tablets and codeine-bearing pain tablets in tandem, is not recognised as a potentially problematic practice, this type of substance use could become a bad romance.

SEEKING HELP OR STAYING ASLEEP?

Only 15% of this sample have already contacted the SADAG-DSD funded Substance Abuse helpline to date. As such, these survey findings provide a window into the world of SADAG community members who fall outside of this helpline client base. We can now learn more about community members and stakeholders who have not self-identified as people impacted by substance use and possible over-use.

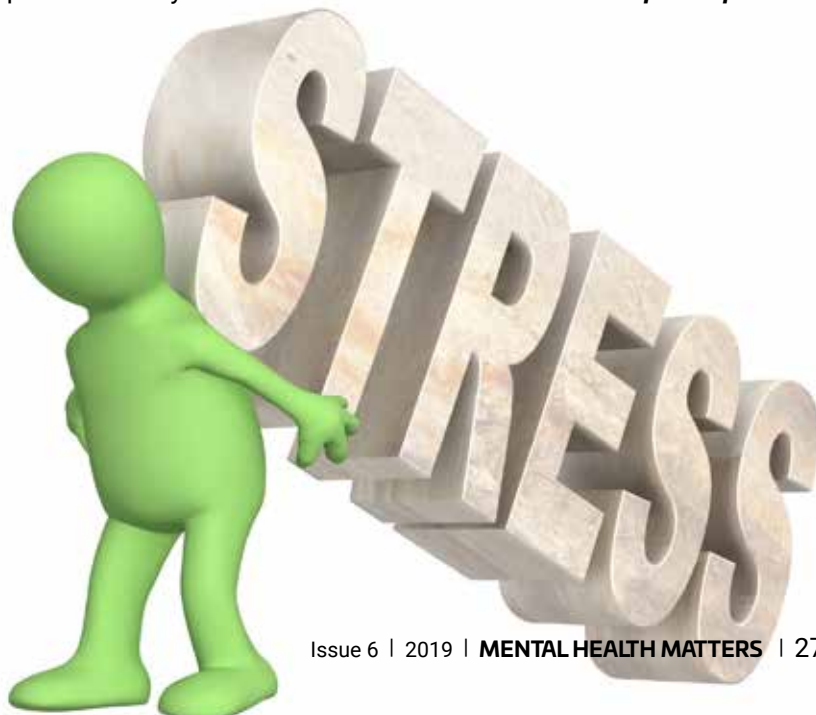
A total of 66% of respondents stated they would be willing to call this helpline for personal use, should the need arise. Just under 80% stated they would consider calling the helpline for family members or

friends in need of support. A series of non-parametric T-tests yielded some interesting additional insights. People who reported personal use of Whoonga (street drug) in the past three months, were the only group of substance users statistically associated with calling in to the helpline. Deeper analysis revealed that people who called the substance abuse helpline were most likely to be frequent Whoonga users.

There was a statistically significant relationship identified between the frequency of inhalant and hallucinogen use and the desire to make a future call to the helpline to gain help for friends and relatives. Further investigation indicated the people who reportedly wouldn't call the helpline also reported a greater frequency of inhalant or hallucinogen use than others in a sample.

Could these findings, taken together, point to the interaction of two important norms at work in the world of substance use? Is the first a mental boundary between legal and illegal substances? Is this a belief bound by the 'war on drugs' approach that many academics and commentators argue has shaped the 2013-2017 South African National Drug Master Plan? Do these legality boundary norms intersect with the second norm, centered on safety? This safety norm could be created through the social construction of drug use, where some substances are defined as so-called 'street drugs' and prescription medications are defined as safe substances? Only additional research into these perceptions will tell us more. **MHM**

References available upon request



SUBSTANCE USE IN THE SADAG ONLINE COMMUNITY

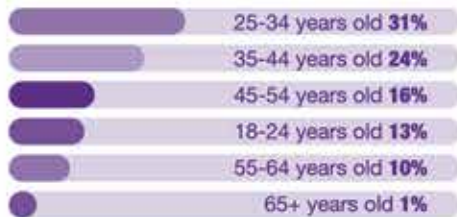
SADAG conducted an online Substance Use Survey to gather more data and better understand the challenges and treatments of those struggling with alcohol abuse, drugs over the counter, prescription medication, use and abuse. This research has helped SADAG create better support programmes, information and advocate for better patient treatment in South Africa.

JULY 2019

262
RESPONDENTS
ON THE ONLINE SURVEY



AGE



RACE

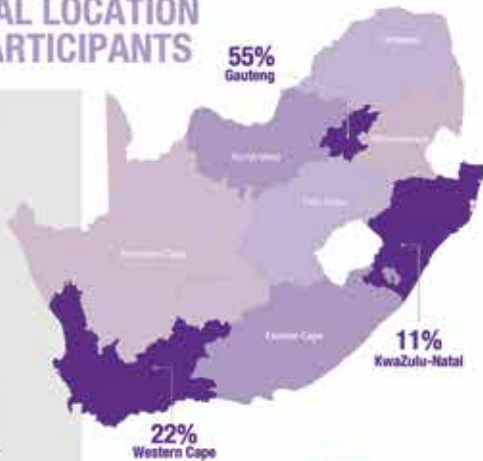


PROVINCIAL LOCATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

SUBSTANCE USE AT LEAST ONCE IN A LIFETIME



DAILY SUBSTANCE USE WITHIN THE LAST 3 MONTHS

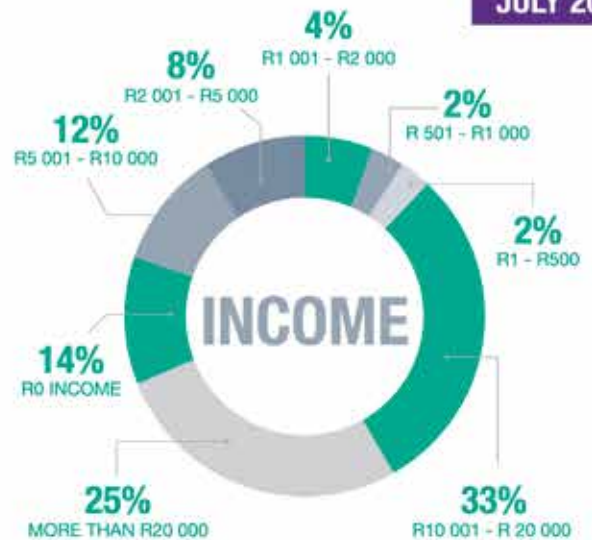


76%

were satisfied with the support they received from their family

34%

felt that their family were not responding to their emotions in helpful ways



During the last 30 days the participants felt (All/most of the time):



Reaching out to **SADAG**

78%

They will use this helpline for friends or family in need, in the future

82%

who have used the SADAG helpline said they will call this particular substance abuse helpline in the future



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