

# Matrics who fail need support - not criticism or judgement - in order to avoid suicide, says KZN Health MEC, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo

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WITH the release of the 2016 matric results today (05 January 2017), KwaZulu-Natal Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo has appealed to parents, guardians and society at large to be more supportive - and less judgmental - towards matric learners who have failed or did not perform well in their final examinations.

This, he says, will help avoid incidents of suicide, as matric failure is regarded as a contributor to the high rate of suicide among young people in South Africa.

“People who turn to desperate measures like suicide often feel helpless and alone. And each life lost to suicide, especially a young life, is one life too many. We therefore must do all we can to prevent these tragedies, not just at a government level, but as civil society. It is a desperate call for help and we must respond collectively,” MEC Dhlomo says.

In South Africa, the average suicide rate is 17.2 per 100 000 (8% of all deaths), according to South Africa Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG). SADAG says that up to 75% of people who commit suicide give some warning – meaning that all suicide threats should be taken seriously.

The warning signs include talking or joking about suicide, depression (identified as loss of interest to things you normally enjoy), preparing for death (such as giving favourite things away), self-criticism and changes in personality, such as sudden negative and aggressive behaviour.

It is believed that the rate of suicide is worsened by the general lack of awareness or understanding of mental challenges in the country.

MEC Dhlomo is thus urging the public to become more vigilant when interacting with matric pupils from the class of 2016 who have not performed well in their exams. This will help identify signs of suicide in order to find ways to assist those in despair.

“South Africa has the eighth highest rate of suicide in the world, according to the South African Federation for Mental Health. Such statistics cannot be ignored. History has shown us that some matriculants who don't do well at the exams tend to struggle to cope with the results and end up taking their own lives. This is a call for us as civil society, parents, friends, colleagues and government to step in and reaffirm our uBuntu values and commitment. As a Department we want anyone who feels overwhelmed to know help is available,” he says.

Dr Dhlomo says that every hospital in the province has a system of referral for those requiring counselling and anyone needing assistance is urged to get in touch with their nearest health facility. “We want young people to know that there is always a way out, and that is not to take one's own life. As a Department, we have skilled counsellors and health workers who are available to provide advice and counselling to those in need. Our country is also fortunate to have many organisations in all areas that are on hand to provide a guiding hand, a listening ear and a way forward to ease the burden people of all ages often face in life.”

According to the SADAG, people who are suicidal can be helped in the following ways:

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-fact about suicide.
- Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings. Accept the feelings.
- Be non-judgmental. Do not debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or

bad. Do not lecture on the value of life.

- Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support.
- Do not dare him or her to do it.
- Do not act shocked. This will put distance between you.
- Do not be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available but do not offer glib reassurance.
- Ask if you may contact a family member.
- Take action. Remove means, such as guns or stockpiled pills.
- Do not leave them alone, get help from persons specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.
- If necessary, get in touch with the police on 10111; or the KZN Emergency Medical Services on 10177, 112 or 0800005133.