

# The role of social work intervention in promoting mental health and resilience in communities: Ubuntu perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*The prevalence of mental health illness is on the rise throughout the world. Mental health is increasingly one of the most overwhelming conditions that has an effect on the social functioning of individuals and families within communities. Mental Health Care Act, No 17 of 2002 of the South African government provides for the protection of individuals and communities against mental health. Still, people continue to experience mental health problems at a high rate. Social workers have a fundamental role to play in improving mental health services and outcomes for communities. Social work services have the potential to improve the lives of people with mental health conditions and build resilience in individuals and families. Resilience is a critical technique that assists individuals to function properly despite the challenges they may have experienced. Research has shown that people with mental health problems struggle to return back to normality. This article aims to explore the roles of social work intervention in promoting mental health and resilience in communities. The study was conducted by analyzing research or studies related to mental health and resilience. The study carried out comprehensive desktop electronic research to gather data and themes from previous studies. The analysis showed that mental health is still a major concern, and social workers have an important role to play in building resilience for individuals and families.*

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## Introduction

Mental health is a condition with complexities that cause or lead to social, emotional, psychological, and financial distress to individual members of the communities, families, and the entire society. Families play a significant role in providing support to members who are experiencing hardship and undue pressure (Mokoena, Madiba & Mokoena-Molepo, 2014). The prevalence of mental health is increasingly on the rise and becoming a problem throughout the world. A report by the World Health Organization (2008) estimates that a total of 16.5% of adults in South Africa have experienced mental health problems in their lives. The Social work profession remains a helping profession that has a significant role in providing intervention to people with mental health challenges. It is a profession that provides fundamental modern mental health services (Jacob & Coetzee, 2018). Competent social workers provide transformation to the lives of people with mental health. Social work is valued as a support system in multidisciplinary and multiagency (Chigangaidze, 2021).

The annual report 2009/10 of the South African Federation of Mental Health (SAFMH) highlighted the dramatic increase in the users of mental health services to a total of 61483. A significant number of the South African population has suffered mental health problems in their lives (Matlala, Maponya, Chigome & Meyer, 2018). Mental health problems cause distress and problems that disrupt the social functioning of individuals, families, and societies (Gullslett, Kim, Andersen & Borg, 2016). Families are critical stakeholders in the provision of mental health services and they are mainly the first to notice when there is a problem with the member. The use of a social model indicates the importance of the use of families when providing mental health care services (Wong, 2014). Families and communities need to have education about mental health to avoid discrimination and stigmatization of users of

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mental health services. Family provides support to a member who has mental health problems to ensure improvements (Burns & Tomita, 2015).

The social work profession in mental health requires the use of 'Ubuntu' to ensure competence, commitment, humanity, and dignity. Ubuntu is an African philosophy that is characterized by humility, respect, dignity, and humanity (Van Breda, 2019). Social work profession provides Ubuntu-based services when providing services to clients. They observe the principle of acceptance and play an advocacy role in social work. Ubuntu social work shows compassion, respect, acceptance, dignity, social justice, and humanity (Dolamo, 2023). It is the African approach of respecting the culture and diversity of the service users. The concept of Ubuntu is increasingly gaining momentum in the social work profession, and it has elements of respect for dignity, humanity, diversity, and social justice (Teater, 2014). Ubuntu is a relevant framework to provide social work intervention in mental health. It is important to factor Ubuntu in providing interventions to mental health users due to its holistic nature of service (Vakharia & Little, 2017). The use of Ubuntu in the social work profession aligns with the principles of social work, the roles of social work, and the values of social work.

Mental health services are complex, stressful, and traumatic in nature. This will require the social worker to be resilient working in this field and to build resilience among the service users (Crowder & Sears, 2017). In addition, Grant & Kinman (2014) argue that for the provision of effective services to society, social workers need to be resilient to be able to address the complex problems associated with mental health. Mental health social workers need to build capacity and provide education and problem-solving skills to assist the users to be resilient when experiencing similar problems. The provided interventions must be able to instill a resilient spirit within the mental health care users. Mental health users have a lot of complex issues that they need to deal with, which cause stress and pressure and may lead to depression. This requires the abilities of the mental health social workers to provide skills to the people who will be receiving the services to be more resilient and be able to return back to normality.

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

The study used the Ubuntu framework for the theoretical and conceptual background. This framework provided the foundational understanding of the study and how important the framework is in social work interventions. The concept of Ubuntu is understood better in the African context to explain the provision of services with humanity, respect, dignity, and compassion (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). It is more common in Sub-Saharan Africa, where service providers are expected to observe diversity, social justice, and humility. Ubuntu is not a new concept in the field of social as it is linked with various principles, values, skills and roles of social work practice. It is a concept of much relevance to the profession of social work and is applied mainly in rural communities (Van Breda, 2019). Mental health has significant complexities and challenges that require social workers in the field to observe and implement the Ubuntu principles (Rankopo & Diraditsile, 2020). Social work interventions are dynamic and need patience, respect, and empathy in working with mental health patients. Social work values understand the importance of the use of Ubuntu as a framework and principle in helping clients (Zvomuya, 2020). The characteristics of professional helping relationships in social work allude to respect and service with dignity and humanity, which is fundamental in providing social work interventions (Mabvurira, 2020). Being empathic to the plight of clients is linked and heavily aligned with the principle of Ubuntu. In social work, the development of trust and respect is important for the individual clients, families, and societies to be able to open up (Van Breda, 2019). The concept and philosophy of Ubuntu are more relevant to providing interventions in mental health due to its consideration of qualitative psychosocial, psychoeducation, humanity, respect, and compassion (Teater, 2014). The Ubuntu principle considers integrating family members, friends and society for the treatment and management of mental health (Tschape, 2013).

## **Research and Methodology**

A comprehensive desktop research was carried out in this paper for the review of the literature. A range of sources was used for the collection of data that is relevant to the study and that aligns with the title of this study. The determination of reliability and validity was the main and key choice for the diversity of literature for the purpose of this study. Journals that were written in English were part of the criteria of inclusion for the study. The literature that was reviewed followed a scientific data collection process. The methodology adopted in this paper was the desktop literature review. An extensive literature search was carried out from various sources, including journals, articles, Google Scholar, dissertations, theses, policies, research gate, and government documents. Thematic analysis was applied to review the literature to give meaning and ensure focus on structures and fundamental discussion points. The concepts searched for in this paper include mental health, Ubuntu, resilience, and social work interventions. These concepts have enabled the researcher to source relevant information required for this paper. 15 research documents were reviewed to present more knowledge about the phenomenon in this paper. Data saturation led to a stop in searching for more information as the information started repeating. These are concepts that were relevant to the title of the study and the themes that were developed. The literature was fundamental in identifying the gaps in literature relating to the roles of social work interventions in providing mental health and building resilience in communities.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### **Findings**

#### **Theme 1: The Use of Advocacy in Mental Health Social Work.**

Advocacy is one of the themes identified through desktop search. Advocacy is one of the critical roles of social work practice that ensures that services to mental health users are provided proportionately. The Ubuntu principle ensures fairness and justice in providing services (Berthold, 2015). It is important that marginalized mental health users are fairly treated, not discriminated against, and not stigmatized and labeled within the community (Vakharia & Little, 2017). Mental health social workers advocate for the human rights of the users of mental health services and ensure that they receive suitable services (Kgatla, 2016). In mental health interventions, social workers must evaluate the appropriateness and fairness and ensure social justice in providing services (Tawiah, Adongo & Aikins, 2015). The fundamental principle of human dignity, human rights, and respect needs to be observed at all times by mental health social workers. This will assist in understanding the principles of diversity, culture as well as Ubuntu (Kelly, 2017). Mental health social worker needs to have the Ubuntu elements to advocate for the users' rights. Individuals who suffer from mental health problems generally suffer from social justice and are unable to get their human rights respected, dignity, and humanity (Bolden, 2014). They are discriminated against in providing services, stigmatized, and categorized as people who might not deserve to receive equal services.

#### **Theme 2: Social Work Interventions.**

The social work profession understands the existing relationship between the environment and the people. When providing intervention strategies, assessments need to be done for human behavior as they guide intervention (Dziekielwski, 2015). The aim of social work intervention is to provide support, reduce stress, assist with the capacity to cope and improve social functioning. Mental health social workers apply ethics, principles, roles, values, techniques, knowledge, and skills to provide intervention (Rajesh, Hamza & Sajitha, 2015). The intervention looks at the environmental factors that may influence the mental health of people. Respect for dignity, human rights, and social justice is important to improve and enhance the social functioning of those who are in distress (Bolden, 2014). The social work profession has what is considered a common intervention method, which include the provision of psychosocial services, counseling, psychoeducation, preventative programs, and family interventions (Rajesh, Hamza & Sajitha, 2014). Social work interventions help to evaluate the type of strategy to be applied to arrive at appropriate intervention. They focus on the client holistically to ensure that they are able to address the problem from the root.

#### **Theme 3: Psychosocial Support Intervention.**

Psychosocial services are interventions provided to mental health users. This intervention advocates for promoting knowledge about mental health and its problems (Stavropoulou & Samuels, 2015). It provides education about discrimination and stigma and ensures social justice and diversity. There is a close linkage between the psychosocial services and the strength-based perspectives (McFarlane, 2016). This perspective focuses on the positives and capacities and builds on the strengths that individuals, families, and societies have to help understand the solutions to problems (Payne, 2014). The intervention understands that people can focus on the positives and their strong points to address distress that threatens their social functioning and mental health. This intervention provides for mobilizing community resources to have awareness programs and develop social support networks and families (Bolton, Hall, Blundo & Lehmann, 2017). The psychosocial support intervention mobilizes the support from the government to observe the plight of mental health care users. It provides support to mental health care users to ensure the alleviation of distress.

#### **Theme 3: Family Therapy Intervention.**

The family intervention focuses on promoting family functioning and relationships and manner of conversing. Interaction is a key element of the family intervention strategy that helps provide support (Bolton, Hall, Blundo & Lehmann, 2017). It mediates to resolve conflicts within the family and focuses on behavior that contributes to conflicts. Family plays a critical role in treating, supporting, and managing mental health problems (Burbach, 2018). Mental health social workers provide education to families about mental health illness, stigmatization, and discrimination. They further facilitate family group conferences and family preservations to ensure support and guidance (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Family therapy focuses on working with significant others who have an impact on the lives of mental health patients (Dziekielwski, 2015). Family therapy can educate family members about mental health illness and reconcile the conflicts and broken relationships during the psychosis episode. Individuals belong to families, and their actions affect the family (Dolamo, 2013). Togetherness has been considered the cornerstone of a successful family. Family therapy emphasizes the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation among the members of the family (Burbach, 2018). Forgiveness and reconciliation promote recovery, resilience, and proper mental health treatment.

#### **Theme 4: Behavior Change Interventions in Mental Health and Use of Ubuntu.**

Behavior change is the fundamental intervention provided in mental health and incorporates the framework of Ubuntu (Berzoff & Drisko, 2015). Mental health social workers use interventions during the behavioral change sessions to motivate change in behavior and adherence to medical intake. Social workers use cognitive therapy and motivational therapy to bring behavioral change in their intervention (Mugumbate & Nyarungu, 2013). Social workers aim to bring change and positive behavioral change. Ubuntu, as a

principle that involves compassion, respect for human rights, dignity, and humanity, emphasizes competence in providing interventions that bring behavioral change (Murphy, Mash & Malan, 2016). Ubuntu ensures the enhancement of societal relationships and encourages good image and positive behaviors. Ubuntu's framework promotes the provision of services with humility to all service users, including those with mental health (Berzoff & Drisko, 2015). The societal and environmental factors that have influenced negative behaviors are explored by mental health social workers. The philosophy of Ubuntu highlights the importance of the provision of education about behaviours that are acceptable (Dolamo, 2013). Social workers in mental health use social skills intervention to bring behavior change. Ubuntu enhances community relationships and mutual understanding and enhances relationships within communities (Dolamo, 2013). Ubuntu promotes interaction, relationships, dialogues, and interactions that strengthen families and communities.

#### **Theme 5: Psychoeducation Intervention.**

Social workers in mental health use cognitive behavioral therapy as part of the psycho-education intervention. This intervention teaches problem-solving skills, builds resilience and capacity, and provides clarity on perceptions (Kramers-Olen, 2014). It promotes collaborations and partnerships between the family, patient, and professionals. Includes the family in the intervention process to help them understand the illness and the importance of their involvement (Economou, 2015). It provides relevant information to enhance problem-solving and conflict resolution, self-esteem, self-confidence, and assertiveness. It combines cognitive behavioral therapy with education and group therapy (McFarlane, 2016). The main purpose of this intervention is to give the family and patient knowledge about the illness, treatment, and management to encourage cooperation and working together with professionals to improve the outcome (Economou, 2015). It is fundamentally the process that involves teaching about mental illness and educating family members about the nature of the illness, the origin, treatment, and the consequences. It further includes the progress of the illness, the development of communication skills, and the skills to solve problems (McFarlane, 2016).

#### **Theme 6: Social Work Research in Mental Health.**

Research is an important element in enhancing interventions and services and bringing new solutions to problems experienced. Social workers in mental health conduct research to improve, enhance, and develop responsive interventions to existing problems (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). They bring new knowledge, alternatives, guidelines and programs to be utilized to address the phenomenon. Research in social work aims to enhance and improve the standard of living of clients in mental health and to provide education to individuals, families, societies, and institutions in mental health (McFarlane, 2016). It seeks to bring an understanding of the dangers and implications of stigmatization and discrimination. It further seeks to improve the existing knowledge, skills, methods, and interventions that address mental health (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). The social skills and social functioning of clients are critical for the proper treatment and management of mental health illness. Social work research in mental health brings out strategies to be applied to address the emotional and psychological effects of mental health (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). It assists with the development of policies and operating procedures in the mental health field. Research brings out new knowledge applicable to the field and empowers the field workers and practitioners to provide recent, up-to-date interventions in the field (Thyer, 2002). It is important for social workers to equip themselves with the development within the profession and ensure that they are competent and responsive to the phenomenon of mental health (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

#### **Theme 7: Social Work Practice Partnership.**

Partnership in social work practice is a critical intervention necessary in mental health to ensure a holistic approach. Social work practice has a fundamental role to play in providing mental health services to individuals, groups, families, and societies (Stevens & Thorud, 2015). There is a significant interest and emphasis on the ecological systems approach, person-centered and strength-based, that provides the foundation and context for social work practice (Suro & De Mamani, 2013). Using these approaches, social workers are able to provide a holistic approach to assess the person-in-environment and ensure consideration for the interactions within the family, resources and environmental factors, cultural diversity and influences, and societal factors that disrupt the social functioning of society (Ziliak, 2015). Social workers use the partnership as part of a developmental approach to ensure the inclusion and involvement of individuals, families, and societies (Mohamed, 2016). Social workers participate in multidisciplinary teams for the provision of mental health services (Roncaglia, 2016). Social workers plead with the multidisciplinary team to consider the social and societal factors when providing mental health services (Ziliak, 2015). Partnership in social work practice encourages the involvement, advocacy, empowerment, and transformation that assist the individual, family, groups, and society to have access to resources (Friedman & Allen, 2014).

## **Discussion**

The study has emphasized the importance of social work interventions in addressing mental health and building resilience among communities. Different intervention strategies have been found to be critical in addressing the social elements that contribute to the mental health illnesses of distressed communities. The use of Ubuntu in providing interventions is fundamental to realizing the principles of humility and respect for social justice. Importantly, the study has established that social workers have a critical role in societies to mitigate the mental health difficulties experienced by communities. Proactive and reactive services are significant in ensuring that stressors are prevented and managed. Psycho-educative programs are very important in the management of mental health problems, focusing on the social aspects of the problems. Social workers focus mainly on building capacity in the clients to

be able to be resilient and be able to identify and solve problems that could lead to mental health illnesses. Social work research is important in providing effective interventions to communities vulnerable to mental health illnesses and ensuring that social workers provide informed-based interventions. In the social work profession, the principles of Ubuntu are fundamental to the service of communities with competence and commitment. The use of Ubuntu in African communities is key to building trust, respect, acceptance, and showing concern for others.

It is important that family members are involved in the social work interventions to ensure that there is sufficient support for the mental health users. A holistic approach to social work intervention is critical to address the mental health problems from the root cause and build resilience for distressed individuals. The family therapy intervention is an effective and efficient type of intervention used by social workers in addressing mental health care services. Advocacy for mental health care users is fundamental in social work. Social workers should perform their advocacy role to ensure respect for the basic human rights of individuals. Social work principles are critical in the provision of mental health care services to the users. The use of a social work empowerment approach is also fundamental to ensure the effective provision of services to distressed communities experiencing mental health problems. Ubuntu and African approaches in social work interventions with mental health clients provide important dynamics and service to the respect for diversity. This also signifies the importance of sensitivity to the African communities which are receiving social work services. Compassion builds capacity for the clients to have problem-solving skills and to be resilient in their service. Social work interventions are closely associated with Ubuntu and the principles of Ubuntu and need to be implemented with respect to humanity and human rights. This will assist in ensuring respect for mental health care users or communities to deal with mental health. It will further assist in managing and preventing stereotypes, perceptions, and stigmatization. African approach to social work intervention is very important.

## Conclusions

Social work interventions are important elements in mental health services. Social workers in mental health use a variety of interventions such as Counseling, family therapy, and psychoeducation to promote mental health. Research in mental health intervention needs to be continuous for the improvement and enhancement of social work interventions. This is critical for the treatment and management of mental health and to avoid discrimination and stigmatization. The use of Ubuntu has a critical role in social work practice and interventions in mental health. The application of compassion, humanity, humility, respect, and empowerment are closely linked and associated with the service of social workers in mental health. The use of empathy is one of the components of Ubuntu and concepts employed in social work. Ubuntu is an essential component in the social work profession for the treatment, management, and provision of psychosocial services in mental health. The paper invites mental health social workers to use the Ubuntu framework and principles when providing services to clients. Social workers remain important in helping professionals in the service of mental health and ensure that they address the social and environmental factors that disrupt the social functioning of clients in mental health. Social work interventions need to include fairness, diversity, and social justice in the provision of mental health services. When providing services, interventions also need to promote resilience through the application of the Ubuntu principle. Preventative programs, involvement of families, and education of communities are important to address the challenges experienced in mental health.

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