

REPORT OF AFRICA PROJECT AGAINST SUICIDE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE HELD FROM  
22ND – 24TH NOVEMBER 2018 AT, POLOKWANE, LIMPOPO, SOUTH AFRICA

The Africa Project Against Suicide (APAS) conference that took place at the Association for the Physically Disabled (APD) hall in Polokwane, Limpopo province South Africa was a great meeting of African leaders from different sectors, all interested in the prevention of suicide on the continent. The participants were drawn from Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa.

Suicide is the act or an instance of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally. The presentations and discussions were extremely informative and thought provoking. The global statistics and those from different countries and sectors shared painted picture of a looming epidemic that needs quick and systematic intervention. Suicide rates are highest in Asia and Eastern Europe. In much of the world, suicide is stigmatized and condemned for religious or cultural reasons. "In some countries, suicidal behaviour is a criminal offence punishable by law. Suicide is therefore often a secretive act surrounded by taboo, and may be unrecognized, misclassified or deliberately hidden in official records of death." – WHO 2002. The statistics from Africa show a rising occurrence and hence the need to begin to actively engage with this matter.

The conference opened with very moving accounts by several participants who had attempted suicide. These set the tone for the rest of the conference as the participants analysed the current situation, discussed the root causes of suicide and finally the way forward in terms of curbing the epidemic. From these personal accounts, it was clear that issues that pushed people to suicide had their base in family matters, school situations and people's inability to deal with the stress of life presented in the various settings.

When all is said and done, the root cause of suicide is stress. Stress that an individual cannot cope with, which then pushes them to see solace in

various solutions that eventually destroy them. Some of the outstanding issues that came out strongly include but are not limited to;

1. Strained family relationships, dysfunctional families and the place and rights of women were discussed in depth
2. The education system that put so much pressure on learners, rarely affirming them and labelling so many of them failures as the end of the day
3. Poverty and very tough economic situations that lead to despair.
4. Mental health issues ranging from diagnosis to treatment and Management
5. Politics and the social and economic strain that this brings in communities
6. Genetics and some people's predisposition to choose suicide as a way out of trouble
7. Poor nutrition and health habits that lead to poor brain and physical development
8. Drug use and abuse due to poor controls to access an wrong diagnosis and sometimes prescription
9. Poor self-esteem caused by failure in varied areas

From the detailed discussions, it was clear that suicide is preventable. We in Africa need to retrace our steps in so far as our family set is concerned and the social support the traditional family gave, enabling people to feel a deep sense of belonging and therefore the level of despair was managed even when tough challenges prevailed.

We also need to revisit how we are educating our children and begin to include the recreational and creative subjects so that they have an outlet for the tensions of growing up, and a clear recognition and appreciation for those that are gifted in Sports and the Creative domains. All learners need to be engaged in these areas that build their capacity to withstand strain

and give them an opportunity to freely express themselves as opposed to bottling up their emotions.

The discussion on Music Therapy was an eye opener, highlighting it as a solution for pain and calming of those with mental health issues.

On Drugs and Suicide, it was clear that we need to be deliberate about managing access and dependence on these. It was noted that it is very easy for people to access certain drugs and this is a major contributor to their misuse and dependence. Our mental health diagnosis, treatment and management as a whole is an area that must be addressed. It was noted that a very high percentage of suicide cases have their root in some mental health disorder.

The issue of our nutrition choices was discussed in detail and it was noted that the excessive use of sugar, trans fats, gluten, omega 3, among others had a very negative effect on the brain and its functions, reducing its capacity to cope with stress. It was also interesting to note that the lack of Vitamins and Minerals in our diets go a long way in affecting how the body and brain works, predisposing it to quick breakdown in times of stress.

There was a great charge from the religious front for selfless living with a call for to shift the following 3 mentalities;

1. What are the things I don't have to What are the things I have?
2. Who can help me to Who can I help?
3. What will I get to What can I give / How many will benefit from my efforts?

This focus on serving and on others creates a spirit of gratitude and contentment and gives one a great of sense worth, making the option of suicide an non-entity.

The conference resolved to work in every sector to keep Africa Alive, with the motto: "Stay Alive." Songs have been composed that will be used to carry

this message – one is an Anthem by the Daniel Madalanga, the East Africa Regional Coordinator and the other is a more contemporary style piece by Honey Olwale, the International Director of APAS.

As we move on, it is clear that we need to keep talking about suicide, be alert and reach out to any around us that may be in distress and we also need to redefine success so that we deflate the pressure the modern definition of success places on people. It is clear that this is the right time to focus on prevention of Suicide before the matter gets out of hand.

By Tabitha Ogango, Educator – Nairobi Kenya.