# A mental health app for teens

The Panda team has started “Panda for Teens” because there are more and more young people who need help with their mental health. Teenagers aged 16 and up can use the Panda app to find professional and community support, share their thoughts and feelings with people their own age, and get access to a wide range of mental health resources.

“All the existing features in the Panda app will also be available to teenagers, including a comprehensive library of mental health resources and the ability to schedule one-on-one sessions with a registered professional.” According to Allan Sweidan, Chief Science Officer of the Panda app, they will also gain access to and participation in Forest sessions devoted to teen-specific concerns.

## The Forest

The app has a virtual support group called “The Forest,” which is run by mental health professionals. Panda users can listen in on Forest sessions and talk freely and anonymously about what they are going through. Forest sessions are live and only available in audio and text for teens. This gives those who want to remain anonymous peace of mind while taking part in sessions. Teens don’t get help for their mental health because of the stigma that surrounds it.

A poll done by UNICEF South Africa in 2021 found that 65% of young people had some kind of mental health problem but did not get help for it. One in five people who answered the survey didn’t know where to get help or didn’t get the right help because they were afraid of “what other people would think.”

“The shame attached to suicide is primarily why young people do not come forward to talk about the troubling thoughts they

are experiencing until it is too late. Behind every suicidal thought, attempt, and another form of self-harm is a cry for help," says Mandisa Mtembu, a registered counsellor. "We need to normalise becoming aware of emotions and their impact from as early as primary school. These conversations need to happen at home, at school, and on other platforms like Panda that are available to our youth and are safe to use."

Because it was Teen Suicide Prevention Week, Mtembu held a Forest session on the Panda app on February 12. The workshop, "What to do if a teenager you know is struggling with their mental health and how to communicate effectively with them," assists children, parents, guardians, and educators in dealing with teenagers who exhibit suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

## The influence of social media

"Generally speaking, social media has become a very destructive force, with young people constantly being connected to their screens. Images of influencers and others seemingly living their best lives, the pressure to continually put on a happy and successful face, and the relentlessness of online bullying all contribute to high levels of acute stress in young people," adds Sweidan. "This engenders a sense of hopelessness and futility, which many teens in South Africa deal with by turning to distractions such as drinking or using other mind-altering substances."

## Getting teens the mental health help they want and need

"We aim to have up to 12 teenagers per group session, enough to keep it interesting and engaging while also giving everyone a chance to have their say," says Sweidan. "The sessions will focus on a variety of issues that they have identified as important and relevant to them, including sessions on

depression, anxiety, and peer pressure. Our teenager users, like all Panda users, will also have the opportunity to suggest session topics that they would like to be part of. They can also download videos and read articles, do assessments, and get other forms of support for any of their mental health issues.”