

WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

Indigenous wisdom offers pathways to healing rooted in community caregiving

"FIRST was the life, not a book. Only in life does the book become life" (Okure).

These words remind us that theology and reflection begin with lived experience, not abstract ideas. The stories of women living with invisible wounds bring this truth to life. In a recent study, one woman told me how, after losing her husband during the Covid-19 pandemic, she disclosed her depression at work, only to be labelled "mentally unstable" and denied promotion. Since then, she has hidden her struggles, taking leave rather than seeking support.

Another said, "in our community, we just carry on with it. There is no time to be depressed." For her, depression is a luxury one cannot afford. Life must go on – food must be on the table, children cared for. This is her community's way of survival: numbing the pain and masking the depression to keep moving. It is here that Madipoane Masenya's metaphor of artificial horns becomes striking, showing how people craft visible strength to conceal invisible wounds.

Masenya tells of a cow insecure about her natural horns, ridiculed by others for being unattractive. Succumbing to pressure, the cow undergoes surgery to wear horns that conform to what others deem acceptable. Much like the cow, many of us hide pain behind masks, conforming to societal expectations that deny our true selves.

This invisible masking is what I call *inxeba elingaphakathi* (isiXhosa for "the invisible wound"). It captures emotional, psychological, and spiritual scars carried silently across generations. For many South African women, these wounds are compounded by systemic oppression, gendered violence, and historical marginalisation. The pain is often unspoken, inexpressible in words, yet it shapes how women navigate life, work, and community.



REV NOBUNTU PENXA-MATHOLENI

Mental health stigma makes this wound even more insidious. Silence, shame, and societal judgment prevent people from seeking support or speaking openly about their struggles. Public stigma (how society perceives mental illness) and self-stigma (internalised shame) intertwine, creating barriers that isolate individuals and perpetuate suffering. Many carry invisible wounds alone, masking their pain to survive in a world that demands resilience at the cost of authenticity.

Yet there is hope. African indigenous wisdom offers pathways to healing that are relational, spontaneous, and rooted in lived experience. Social community caregiving – where neighbours, family, and friends actively support one another – provides a practical and culturally grounded means of addressing hidden wounds. Within these shared spaces of care and solidarity, individuals begin to reconnect with themselves and with others.

Storytelling, songs, dance, and rituals are not merely cultural expressions – they are lifelines. One striking example is the song *Jerusalem* by Master KG featuring Nomcebo Zikode, which became a viral sensation and reflective anthem during the Covid-19 pandemic. On September 16 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa invited citizens to join the *Jerusalem* dance challenge as part of Heritage Day, add-

ing a unifying and uplifting element to a nation facing unprecedented challenges.

From a mental health perspective, the lyrics carry profound meaning for those navigating *inxeba elingaphakathi*:

◆ *Jerusalem ikhaya lami* (Jerusalem is my home) affirms the deep human need for connection and rootedness – a space where one is accepted, loved, and at peace.

◆ *Ngilondolozwe* (Guard me) is a plea for tender protection, an embrace that nurtures healing and wholeness.

◆ *Uhambe nami* (Walk with me) symbolizes solidarity, recognizing the need to be supported through life's darkest spaces.

◆ *Zungangishiyi lana* (Do not leave me here) expresses a yearning to be rescued from isolation and despair.

◆ *Ndawo yami ayikho lana* (My place is not here).

◆ *Mbuso wami awukho lana* (My kingdom is not here) speak to hope, purpose, and the belief that one's identity transcends present suffering.

Through song, communities translate invisible wounds into shared strength. *Jerusalem* became more than music – it is a medium of collective care, a reminder that we are not alone, and a pathway for emotional and spiritual healing. Supported by social community caregiving, these cultural expressions foster resilience, hope, and belonging, offering spaces where indigenous stories and practices restore dignity and support recovery.

This approach challenges dominant Western psychiatric models, which often reduce mental health to individual pathology (a disease or disorder that affects a person's body or mind), overlooking the broader social, historical, and cultural dimensions of distress. By centring indigenous knowledge systems, we recognise that mental health is not merely an individual concern

but a communal one. Healing is not solitary – it is nurtured through relationships, cultural practices, and shared experience.

World Mental Health Day – observed on October 10 – reminds us that invisible wounds are real, but so is our capacity to respond. Interventions must reflect the cultural, social, and historical realities of the communities they serve. Silence must be met with safe spaces for dialogue. Stigma must be met with understanding and solidarity. And healing must draw on practices that resonate with lived experience, affirm dignity, and foster belonging.

Recognising *inxeba elingaphakathi* means looking beyond visible symptoms to address deeper emotional and psychological wounds. It means validating experiences long marginalised, creating environments where people can speak, be heard, and receive support. Mental health is not just the absence of illness – it is the presence of care, connection, and community.

As we mark World Mental Health Day, let us commit to walking together – *endleleni* – toward understanding, empathy, and collective healing. Let us honour the invisible wounds carried across generations and act in ways that restore dignity, cultivate resilience, and embrace indigenous practices that nurture our communities. By acknowledging hidden struggles, listening without judgment, and supporting culturally grounded approaches, we can make the invisible visible.

Inxeba elingaphakathi need not remain hidden. Together, through solidarity, storytelling, songs, and care, we can transform silent suffering into shared strength, ensuring no wound goes unseen and no voice unheard.

Penxa-Matholeni is a lecturer in the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology at Stellenbosch University.