

**ADDRESS BY DPWI DEPUTY MINISTER BERNICE SWARTS DURING THE DEPARTMENT'S
FATHER AND MEN'S HEALTH SESSION, 07 JULY 2023**

Programme Directors: Sizwe Mhlungu and Dr. Love;

Acting Director General and Senior Government Officials;

Speakers for the day: Prof. Majane; Dr Senathi Sifisha; Dr Zondi; Dr Love; Pastor Bafana Nkosi; and Mr Mabiletsa;

Our Distinguished Guests Today: All the fathers and men of the DPWI family;

Social Partners and stakeholders;

Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen;

To you the caring athers, you the good men, and dear colleagues, the following poem was written with you in mind on International Men's Day:

"When life gets hard, you become the family's rock,

You answer the door, even before we knock

There are times when everything falls apart,

You make things easy, lighten up the heart.

Such is the beauty of your soul,

You heal wounds, you play many roles

Today is your day,

rise and shine,

Dear, sweet men!"

We meet as the staff and family of the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI) to recognise, appreciate, and encourage the fathers and men of this important Department.

Allow me to pay a special tribute to all those who worked hard to organise this event and to convey heartfelt gratitude to the inspiring speakers who have shared great wisdom and insights on how men can improve and secure their wellbeing and health, a topic that is sometimes neglected by the men that we adore and value so much.

I am the first to admit that I am taking the lessons to be a better wife, a better mother, and a better companion to my partner because it is clear that we need each other as partners to overcome our challenges.

We hold this crucial engagement during Mandela's Month which is dedicated to the selfless service of Madiba to humanity and the triumph of the human spirit against adversity.

To men and fathers who may be down and feeling the hard knocks of life, please remember Tata's words when he said: *"The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."*

Commenting on the unfailing and resilient spirit of the father our nation, former US President, Bill Clinton said: *"Mandela has taught us so much about so many things. Perhaps the greatest lesson, especially for young people, is that, while bad things do happen to good people, we still have the freedom and the responsibility to decide how we respond to injustice, cruelty and violence and how they will affect our spirits, hearts, and minds."*

To you men of DPWI, may the message of Madiba encourage you not to give up the noble fight for your loved ones even as you face the challenges that are not of your own making.

We are aware that the rising cost of living has had a negative effect on a number of South African men.

The hikes in interest rates, price of fuel, food, and electricity while salaries have not risen as rapidly has reduced the disposable income of many South Africans.

Evidence demonstrates that the middle class is struggling to make ends meet putting more stress on families and men in particular.

Ours is a world where men are still expected to be breadwinners and protectors of their families.

With the high levels of unemployment and lack of economic opportunities, society in general and men in particular, feel stripped off their dignity as they face grinding poverty.

We have not yet invented a new language that frees men from societal expectations of yesterday while a number of men feel worthless as they struggle to feed their families, clothe their children, and even pay for their school fees.

Like yesterday, we still say "ubuhle bendoda zinkomo zayo", almost tying a man's sense of self-worth to capital accumulation when there is so much want and deprivation.

With high levels of stress and anxiety about the future, we find some men becoming violent not only against women, but also against women and children. And we can at least agree that there can be no justification for the tortured to turn into torturers themselves.

As DPWI, we welcome the participation of organisations like Sanlam to help all of us plan better and improve our financial health under these trying times where the country is feeling the economic weight.

There can be no ambiguity that financial wellness goes far in reducing stress and improving the health of people. It is in our hands to make use of the financial advice to improve our finances.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

An organisation like DPWI must see the health and wellbeing of its employees as an investment, not waste.

Our Health and Wellness Programme must actively promote a healthy lifestyle to prevent illness and be in a position to advise and refer employees who may need professional healthcare.

Let us seize the day and make our contribution in addressing mental health in the workplace.

It is our generation that can fight ignorance, stereotypes, and even stigma on mental health illness.

Stigma on mental illness contributes to discrimination and marginalisation of people suffering from conditions like depression and anxiety.

When we gossip about colleagues with mental health conditions, we push people not to disclose and seek help.

When some men say those men who have depression are “weak” or are not “man-enough”, we contribute to the culture of silence and forcing men not to seek professional help.

It is for this reason that men’s mental health is often unacknowledged, undiagnosed, and thus untreated.

We need more circles of men supporting each other, not excluding and scorning one another.

We must all stand up against work place bullying and refrain from abusing our power to threaten and intimidate junior and vulnerable staff.

Whatever our differences, let us uphold the inherent dignity of all which is guaranteed in our Constitution. Equally, let us remember that we are all made in the image of God.

A report by the South African Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP) reveals that our country sits as the 10th country with most suicides globally. And that “of the 13 774 suicides reported in South Africa, 10 861 were men whilst 2 913 were women”

The Report underlines that, *“men are five times more likely to die by suicide than women and often use more aggressive methods...[and that] men don’t speak about their conditions.”*

This is not a uniquely South African situation. International research shows that:

- 1) Men have a suicide rate 3 times higher than women;
- 2) 1 in 3 men have been the victims of domestic violence;
- 3) men on average die 4-5 years before women;
- 4) men are nearly twice as likely to suffer from lung cancer than women; and,
- 5) men are nearly twice as likely to suffer from heart disease than women.

We applaud all the good men in our country who are standing up against the scourge of gender based violence and femicide. Equally, we must pay attention to the cries of women who are themselves victims of abuse and domestic violence as the research indicates.

It is important that men who report abuse by women are not ridiculed or shamed. We must reject the idea that men who cry out for help have been emasculated or behave like women. The myth of “Tigers Don’t Cry” or “indoda ayikhali, ifela ngaphakathi” contribute to men suffering alone, fearing to complain because of such social attitudes.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we cannot emphasise the importance of eating healthy and regular exercise to curb lifestyle diseases like obesity, diabetes, and heart diseases.

Many of these chronic ailments can be prevented or better managed by not smoking, cutting down on sugar and oil. We can assure you that there are several advantages of maintaining a healthy weight, taking a walk, and visiting the gym.

Compatriots,

It is high time that men openly discussed the risks associated with prostate cancer

We can do so by spreading awareness about the diseases.

We can do so by encouraging regular screening of the prostate.

Research indicates that prostate cancer is still the most common male cancer globally and showing significant increases.

The 2019 National Cancer Registry reveals that the lifetime risk for prostate cancer in men in our country, is 1 in 15.

We have learned that risk factors for prostate cancer include age, ethnicity, family history, being overweight and dietary factors.

Prostate cancer risk can be reduced by eating lots of fruit and vegetables, maintaining a healthy weight and limiting red meat and high fat dairy products.

As we recognise you today fathers, men, and colleagues at DPWI, may you again rise to the occasion and provide much needed and servant leadership to take our country forward.

South Africa, your communities, and this Department appreciates you and values you, hence our interest in your health and wellbeing.

We pray that you will, starting today, take practical steps to secure your financial wellbeing, mental health, and reduce the risks associated with prostate cancer and lifestyle diseases.

May you find fulfilment in your work and continue to do your very best to serve our people and our nation.

Allow me to dedicate this 1930s poem by the German dramatist, Bertolt Brecht

IN PRAISE OF LEARNING

*Learn the simplest things!
For you whose time has come it is never too late!
Learn your ABC, it is not enough, but learn it!
Do not let it discourage you, begin!
You must know everything! You must take over the leadership!
Learn, man in the asylum!
Learn, man in prison!
Learn, wife in the kitchen!
Learn, man of sixty!
Seek out the school, you who are homeless!*

Sharpen your wits, you who shiver!
Hungry man, reach for the book: It is a weapon.
You must take over the leadership!

South Africa Works Because of Public Works!

I thank you!