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South African Journal of Psychology 2024, Vol. 54(3) 415–420 © The Author(s) 2024



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DOI: 10.1177/00812463241263255 journals.sagepub.com/home/sap





Commentary

Loadshedding, safety concerns, and mental health in South Africa

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Abstract

Persistent power cuts, known as loadshedding, have become a disruptive fixture in South African daily life, affecting routines and economic stability. In this commentary, we argue that much attention has been given to the economic impact and political ramifications linked to loadshedding, but its psychological toll on the population has been largely overlooked. Access to electricity must be regarded as a basic human right as it is closely linked with the enjoyment of various rights like human dignity, proper housing, water, and healthcare. The lack of comprehensive research on the mental health impacts of loadshedding needs to be addressed more so against the background of the socio-psychological impact of COVID-19. Preliminary research findings indicate that ongoing loadshedding disrupts daily routines, potentially leading to safety concerns, stress, anxiety, mental strain, and isolation. The lack of safety, exacerbated by power cuts, increases vulnerability to crime and strains societal cohesion. Taken together, this may heighten the likelihood of the development of continuous traumatic stress (CTS). Despite the National Mental Health Policy framework acknowledging threats to mental health, loadshedding is omitted, highlighting a need for recognition of its impact. Acknowledging loadshedding's silent impact is crucial, especially considering its exacerbation of safety concerns and vulnerability to CTS. A shift in perspective is needed, moving mental health from a luxury to a necessity. Psychologists are urged to advocate for mental health services and community-based solutions, emphasising collective responsibility in addressing the mental health crisis compounded by ongoing loadshedding.

Keywords

Continuous traumatic stress, loadshedding, mental health, sense of safety

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Ongoing power cuts, also referred to as loadshedding, have become a constant and disruptive but integral aspect of daily life for South Africans, shaping routines and threatening economic stability. The impact of loadshedding on the South African economy has received much attention in the media and scholarly circles, more so as 2024 is the year of national elections (Erero, 2023; Naidoo, 2023; Walsh et al., 2021). Loadshedding is a complex societal and psychosocial phenomenon. Just as it disrupts routines and daily life, it also creates and sustains new opportunities and forms of sociality. Its impact on individuals and communities is contextually mediated (cf. Matinga & Annegarn, 2013), as are access to and benefit from alternative energy sources. The relationship between loadshedding and mental health is likely to be similarly complex. However, the mental health impact of loadshedding on the South African population has been mostly overlooked.

The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (RSA, 1996) does not explicitly mention access to electricity as a fundamental human right. However, based on its Bill of Rights, the courts have demonstrated that access to electricity is essential to enjoy various rights. These include the right to human dignity, access and housing, water, and healthcare (Dube & Moyo, 2022). Against the backdrop of political uncertainty and a general lack of trust in the government's ability to protect its citizens and provide services that ensure people's human dignity, it is evident that the ongoing and socially disruptive power cuts are likely to have wide-ranging psychological effects. Loadshedding disrupts daily routines, elicits frustration and a sense of powerlessness, heightens anxiety in a society already grappling with safety concerns, exacerbates economic hardships, and affects the physical well-being of individuals. The all-encompassing sense of uncertainty linked to unpredictable loadshedding schedules, as well as not knowing when the energy crisis will end, is particularly concerning in South Africa where the population is already at risk of mental health challenges, more so since the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lentoor, 2022). Consequently, in the past year, there have been some signs that mental health organisations and professionals are trying to foreground the psychological ramifications of the ongoing loadshedding in South Africa. A preliminary online survey conducted in early 2023 by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), using community members on its database, identified symptoms of depression and anxiety, isolation, and anger in response to questions about the impact of loadshedding on mental health. Further results indicated strained social relationships, financial challenges, and safety concerns. The psychological impact was attributed more to delays in power being restored or unplanned power outages than to planned power cuts. Individuals who planned around loadshedding schedules were more resilient and employed more positive coping techniques such as meditation, exercise, or socialising (SADAG, 2023).

In a special *South African Journal of Science* issue focusing on loadshedding, Bantjes and Swartz (2023) called for more rigorous empirical data to explore the link between loadshedding and mental health but warned against conflating psychological distress with psychopathology. In the same issue, Marchetti-Mercer (2023) highlighted the importance of considering the ecosystemic nature of loadshedding and called for the government to recognise the impact on individual well-being. Recently, a national mixed-methods study exploring the mental health impacts of loadshedding, on a sample of 1200 South Africans found that loadshedding has seriously disrupted people's routines, such that feelings of stress, anxiety, mental strain, and isolation were reported, along with the continuous erosion of their sense of safety.

The reported lack of a sense of safety warrants specific attention. A sense of safety is an essential pre-condition for human flourishing and well-being. It is a basic human need initially described by Maslow (1943) in his hierarchy of needs. A sense of safety is not just an individual experience – it is deeply rooted in people's social, communal, and societal contexts. Economic, political, and health-related challenges can deeply alter our sense of safety and well-being.

South Africans live in unsafe environments, so the threat of violent crime undermines people's sense of safety (Eagle, 2015). Security threats brought about by loadshedding have also been reported by the media (Ndlovu, 2023). The country is also still recovering from COVID-19, which profoundly reduced people's mental health and general psychological well-being (Lentoor, 2022; Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021). The pandemic altered people's sense of control over their environment and their sense of safety because of the uncertainty it introduced. Lockdowns, separation from social networks, and fear of infection for oneself and others led most people to live in a state of heightened stress and anxiety for many months (Isandla Institute, 2021) leaving individuals vulnerable. Ongoing loadshedding has exacerbated safety and security concerns.

Such concerns about safety, especially in public spaces and at night, are likely to be aggravated when loadshedding occurs around and after dark. An increasing number of reports from both affluent and impoverished regions of the country connect power outages to a rise in interpersonal crime, specifically incidents of robbery, in both affluent and poorer urban areas (Lamb, 2023, South African Police Service [SAPS], 2020; Timelive, 2023). Power outages hinder target hardening and surveillance. Increased perceptions of crime may lead those who can afford to do so to increase home security measures, but alarms and security cameras require electricity to function effectively. Furthermore, the lack of street lighting renders people more vulnerable to crime. People are more reluctant to leave their homes at night or walk in unlit streets. This strains relationships and the hospitality and entertainment industries as people become reluctant to engage in activities that involve leaving the relative safety of their homes. This is occurring in a climate of consistently high crime that ensures that South Africans who are already vulnerable to increased stressors now experience this even more.

Models of stress in psychology concur that stress occurs as a response to a stressor (perceived threats or demands, e.g., loadshedding). Critical key components in understanding stress include appraisal (how one evaluates stressors), coping strategies (adaptive or maladaptive ways of managing stress), and individual differences in mitigating stress (such as personality traits or past experiences; Epel et al., 2018). Stress can, therefore, impact mental and physical health. Stress can be acute (short term) or chronic (long term). In the case of ongoing loadshedding and concerning the appraisals received from survey responses of loadshedding, it is clear that loadshedding impacts mental health, with several people reporting symptoms linked to depression and anxiety. This appraisal and experiences of stress are also continuous or more long term, leading us to suggest that these safety concerns, compounded with the uncertainty created by varying loadshedding schedules, mean that South Africans may arguably be more vulnerable to experiencing continuous traumatic stress (CTS) symptoms such as very high levels of anxiety, hyperarousal, and potential for alarm, as well suspicion, caution, and mistrust in interpersonal engagements (Eagle, 2015).

Research carried out by Eagle (2015) shows that CTS is high in a society where the ongoing reality of the risk of exposure to current and future violence is elevated. Extreme crime levels can erode trust in communities, reducing the collective sense of solidarity and security and the possibility of social cohesion. CTS has already been examined in South Africa concerning crime and violence (Eagle, 2015; Kaminer et al., 2018). However, we argue that loadshedding and the safety concerns it creates may elicit symptoms linked to CTS. Emerging evidence from the SADAG and mixed-methods national surveys suggests a link between the experience of loadshedding and safety and security concerns and symptoms previously reported as CTS.

Eagle (2015) proposes that South Africans may express their distress in ways that diverge from conventionally expected clinical presentations, for example, through the manifestation of increased levels of depression, physical symptoms, and potential sub-clinical indicators of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moreover, these expressions could bear a resemblance to general stress patterns. It is, however, encouraging that Eagle and Kaminer (2013) maintain that CTS is so closely

tied to a specific context that associated responses or symptoms may disappear immediately upon removal from such contexts. Nevertheless, loadshedding is still prevalent, and at the time of writing, there was no indication that any permanent or imminent solutions were in sight.

What does this all mean for psychology in South Africa as loadshedding continues?

The COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness of mental health issues, as people across the globe experienced several psychological challenges in that time of heightened crisis and stress (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). The ongoing loadshedding crisis should receive the same attention as it affects all of the country's inhabitants, albeit at different levels and to a different extent, depending on people's socio-economic means and access to mechanisms that may mitigate the impact of loadshedding.

Loadshedding has profoundly altered people's ability to carry on with the activities of daily living, working, and studying, as well as to maintain solid social connections. We argue that the majority of the population is already vulnerable to CTS given the high levels of crime and a general lack of a sense of security. The added burden of loadshedding adds to mental health distress in the country, emphasising the need for increased mental health services. Against a backdrop of deep health inequalities and an unequal healthcare system, and with only 0.97 psychologists per 100,000 uninsured population and even fewer psychiatrists (0.31 per 100,000), it is clear that adequate mental health support for the general South African population is not available (Department of Health, 2023). Stein et al. (2023) argue that looking at human resourcing when it comes to mental provisions is an essential 'game changer', suggesting that we should 'move away from guarding professional turf and towards competency-based care' (Stein et al., 2023, p. 2). It is a sad reality that in a country where so many people live in poverty and dire social circumstances, mental health seems to be regarded as a luxury. Mental health should not be considered 'nice to have' or relegated to a perfunctory service rather than a thoughtful and meaningful one by those in (and usually with) power. The government is as much responsible for ending loadshedding as much as it is responsible for providing mental healthcare, but it is failing on both accounts. While it is our responsibility as psychologists to advocate for increased and improved mental health services, it is our joint responsibility to find contextually relative and community-relevant solutions to increased access to mental healthcare (World Health Organization, 2022). Community-based solutions, alongside those offered by the profession, can help provide much-needed care. It is time to step out of the dark collectively.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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