

# Zanele Hlatshwayo runs to fight depression and save lives



Zanele Hlatshwayo, ultra runner and founder of the #Rise18 campaign to raise funds to support the fight against depression and suicide.

While she runs, she feels free, she feels safe – she is loved, says Zanele Hlatshwayo.

“I literally feel God take my hand when I’m running and He is with me until I cross the finish line,” says the ultra-marathon runner and campaigner for people who suffer from mental illness – especially depression.

She took on the challenge to run 18 races between January and July this year, in a campaign called #Rise18 in partnership with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG).

Hlatshwayo has two more big races coming up – the Comrades Marathon on June 10, which is 90 km and the Washie 100 race of 161 km, which is held in the Eastern Cape over July 27-28.

“As daunting as it is, I know God is with me. My motto this year has been *For God has not given us the spirit of fear but of power, love and a sound mind.*”

For Hlatshawayo the fight against depression hits home. She was deeply depressed after the loss of her father, a man who she calls her hero, who committed suicide

### **Finding a cause**

Depression is a silent killer – in South Africa 23 people commit suicide daily – mostly men with teen suicide on the rise. It is statistics such as these that inspire Hlatshawayo to take the next step and make a difference.

“There are a lot of misconceptions about depression and suicide. The aim is to drive some form of change and for people to realise that suffering from mental illness is not a sign of weakness. We need to love and support those people who may suffer from it. It may be just the only thing that could save their lives, literally.”

### **Her saving grace**

For Hlatshawayo the goal of the project is not only to raise money for the cause – she wants to share her struggle with others to create awareness on how to overcome it.

After her father’s suicide Hlatshawayo cried almost daily but eventually she got tired of crying. It was then that she knew she needed to do something to overcome this.

“So one day I decided to go for a run. At first I was running away from all the pain, anguish and the bitterness of it all but soon, I started to realise running made the whole ordeal bearable and most importantly made me feel stronger,” she says.

“Running was and is my sacred space where I get to make decisions about my life. There are no interruptions just me and my thoughts.”

## **The struggle is real**

After her father's death Hlatshwayo struggled with her anger towards God.

"I couldn't pray and wondered where God was on that fateful day when my father took his life, or even worse, was He there but did nothing?"

During these difficult times her grandmother heard her cry in the evenings, and she comforted her by praying for her, when she couldn't."

Hlatshwayo finally started praying for herself again.

"I asked God to help me forgive myself and to forgive my father, and grant me the wisdom to accept what had happened."

Then God spoke to her. "God wanted me to share my story. He told me it would not be easy but that because of this, lives would be saved. I believe by being obedient to God I have stepped into my purpose.

"Through my pain I have found that my purpose is to save as many lives as possible."

Through this journey Hlatshwayo came to realise that God is love.

"Even in the midst of darkness God is love and He understands our tears, even when no one else is there. This year I have seen the hand of the Lord work miracles through #Rise18. At the beginning I was scared. How could God trust me while I still suffered and how do I muster the courage?

"But God carried me through it all despite everything. Even after I have suffered injuries because of the running, I know God will see me through. It is a journey I have to complete!"

To support #Rise18 go to [www.backabuddy.co.za/rise18](http://www.backabuddy.co.za/rise18) or join Hlatshwayo's cause by following her on Twitter, Facebook or

Instagram