

BIOGRAPHY: CHARLENE SUNKEL

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Biography Brief

Ms Sunkel is the Founder/ CEO of the Global Mental Health Peer Network (www.gmhpn.org). She is a global mental health advocate with lived experience with schizophrenia. She has published internationally on issues related to mental health and human rights, stigma and the needs of people with mental illness in low- and middle-income countries. Ms Sunkel co-chaired the Lancet Commission on Ending Stigma and Discrimination in Mental Health, currently a Commissioner on the Lancet Commission on Psychosis, and was a Commissioner on the Lancet Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development and the one on The Future of Psychiatry. Ms Sunkel has been involved in provided technical assistance to national and international mental health related policies, reports and documents. She serves on a number of international boards and committees, and received several national and international awards for her work.



Charlene was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1991 and her journey since then has exposed her to the challenges experienced by persons with mental disorders within and outside of the mental health sector. This encouraged her to commit herself to fighting the cause for mental health and human rights. In 2003 she became involved in volunteer work in the field of mental health, and in 2006 accepted a position in mental health advocacy and awareness with a Gauteng provincially based organization. In 2014 she joined a national mental health organization in South Africa as Program Manager for Advocacy and Development until 2018.

In 2018 she established the Global Mental Health Peer Network (www.gmhpn.org), where she commenced her position as Founder/CEO in January 2019.

She has written and produced theatre plays on life stories of persons living with mental disorders (including one on her life with schizophrenia), and written and produced a short feature film based on the storylines of the theatre plays – to raise public awareness.

Charlene had been involved in the review/ drafting of various policies and legislation in South Africa and provided technical assistance to national and international mental health related reports and documents. Charlene has also served as an Expert Consultant for the World Health Organisation, providing technical assistance and lived experience perspectives into various high-level documents.

She serves on a number of international boards and committees including: Editorial Advisory Board of the Lancet Psychiatry; Executive Board of Mental Health and Human Rights FGIP; Board Member of the Global Mental Health Action Network; Countdown Global Mental Health Coalition; Global Strategic Partner of the Speak Your Mind Global Campaign; UPSIDE International Advisory Board; ASSET International Advisory Board; World Psychiatry Association - Lived Experience and Carer Advisory Board; Movement for Global Mental Health International Advisory Board; Healthy Brains Global Initiative – Lived Experience Council. She previously served on the South African Presidential Working Group on Disability and Ministerial Advisory Committee on Mental Health. Ms Sunkel is the former Principal Coordinator for the Movement for Global Mental Health. She annually guest lectures at the Stellenbosch University in South Africa (sharing her recovery story with psychology students) and the Indian Law College's International Diploma on Mental Health, Human Rights and Law in Pune in India (on the key rights of persons with lived experience).

She has published widely on issues related to mental health and human rights, stigma and the needs of people with mental illness in low- and middle-income countries¹⁻²¹, and she served as a Commissioner on the Lancet Commission on Global Mental Health and Sustainable Development¹¹ and on the WPA-Lancet Psychiatry Commission on the Future of Psychiatry¹². She co-chaired the Lancet Commission on Mental Health Stigma and Discrimination¹⁴, and currently a Commissioner on the Lancet Commission on Psychosis.

She received a number of national and international awards for her work. Awards received include: Special Achievement Award (SA Federation for Mental Health, 2006); Chairman's Award for Advancing Psychosocial Rehabilitation (Talisman Foundation, 2011); National Disability Awards (Inseta: Finalist Champion Award, Finalist Woman Award, Winner Woman Award, 2011); Special Achievement Award for Innovative Program in Psychiatric Disability (SA Federation for Mental Health, 2012); Award of Excellence in the field of Mental Health (SA Federation for Mental Health, 2014); Jim Birley Scholarship Award (Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry, Netherlands, 2015); Tributes Excellence Awards, Disability Rights category (Valhalla Arts, South Africa, 2015); Outstanding Achievement in Mental Health (Swiss Foundation and WHO, 2017), Honorary Membership (World Psychiatry Association, 2020), Pardes Humanitarian Prize in Mental Health (Brain and Behavior Research Foundation, 2021).

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