



AGONY AUNTS: Sis Dolly is one of SA's best-loved agony aunts.
NOLAN HUTCHESON



LONG HISTORY: The first agony aunts date back to the 1700s.
PICTURE: JEFFREY

Advice columnists play key role in finding solutions to common problems, but don't have all the answers

The reassuring role of the agony aunt

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"Dear Agony Aunt..." reads the introduction to several SOS letters. I have penned over the years, but never had the courage to post.

These sporadic moments date back to my teenage years when, filled to the hilt with some or other overwhelming emotion, my teeming brain and restless hands would reach for pen and paper to offload onto.

After carefully detailing my woes and hurts — ensuring everything was peppered with a generous dose of drama, of course — I would fold the letters up and place them in a box I kept hidden in my closet, never to see the light of day again.

Now don't get me wrong, it's not that I don't believe in sharing my problems with others, just not the public at large.

My fear was that some cunningly ingenious individual from my close circle would easily put two and two together, and figure out just who the aggrieved "anonymous" author of the letter really was.

But while I may have feared airing my dirty laundry in public, hundreds of thousands of other people are not faced by such leading to idyllic weekend afternoons where my friends and I devoured page after page of agony aunt columns in every magazine we could get our hands on.

For years we walked in the shoes of young and old, male and female, as they described their issues: From low-thrill satirical marriages, demanding but unfulfilling careers, desperate parents seeking advice on how to tame their teenage charges, to bored housewives looking for ways to spice things up between the sheets.

There is no doubt that there is something cathartic about sharing one's problems with a stranger. Even more gratifying for myself at least, is reading about someone else's problems and very often benefiting by taking the offered advice.

This is probably why agony aunts — wise, ever-so-calm, stic advice — have been and continue to be in existence even in this modern age.

These women have been around for centuries.

For America, the go-to agony aunt was Ann Landers in a column called "Ask Ann Landers".

Ann, penned by Eppie Lederer, was born in the pages of the Chicago Tribune and for

more than 40 years doled out advice on everything from infidelity and domestic violence to adult bed wetting.

A BBC documentary *See, Lies and Love* about *The Agony Aunt Story* traced British agony aunts all the way from the 18th century to the modern day.

It covers the most common problems the advice columnists have addressed over the last 300 years — coarseness confessions, to start, with racy topics following through the years where misogynistic authors started a trend of slanting their sexual fantasies with readers. Yikes.

Back home, our dearest Sis Dolly is without a doubt one of SA's most famous agony aunts. From the early '80s, this iconic figure has shared her wisdom with all and sundry, from learning how to deal with cruel in-laws to choosing partners.

Her column became a playground for sex talk for men and women of all races who, judging by the numbers of letters sent in, had no platform for such discussions before.

I remember those steamy, blush-worthy letters well.

Aided by technology, agony aunts, and lately some agony uncles too, no longer only exist between the pages of a newspaper or magazine.

Need a moral compass on the go? Then download an agony aunt app where, for the price of a can of cold drink, you can have access to around-the-clock advice.

They're on blogs, websites, podcasts, radio and even on social media, but could there be any danger in taking the advice of a flawless stranger?

"Agony aunts are usually the most non-threatening way of seeking help for someone in distress," East London-based counselling psychologist Luvu Adams said.

"They provide essential primary relief or what we refer to as psychological first aid."

Adams explained that it is important to remember when sharing your problems with a stranger or a therapist that neither of them has prior knowledge of you or your problems.

"This eliminates bias and judgment, facilitating an atmosphere for a more honest and comfortable outlet," she explained.

In a 2003 article published on academic research website Research Gate, University College London lecturer and then *Men's Health* agony aunt Peta Boynton said the agony aunt pages



PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST-AID: Wise, ever-so-calm, stic advice continues to be in existence in the modern age. PICTURE: JEFFREY

played a crucial role in teenage sex education. An extract from the article reads: "Teenagers are more likely to use the media than other sources of information for advice on personal sex questions — particularly concerning issues that they feel they cannot ask teachers, parents, or healthcare staff about."

"A poll of readers of the teenage magazine *Gosmo GIRL* suggested that if they had a sex-related question, 79% would first consult a magazine agony

column. Only 3% would speak to a doctor and only slightly more (18%) would ask their parents, the problem page has an informative and reassuring role."

There are, of course, some downsides. Looking for empathy and a kind word is an immediate emotional Band-Aid as you wrestle with your woes?

Then perhaps select your choice of agony aunt carefully as some are known for their no-nonsense approach, which can

be rather abrasive.

In 2016, a Reddit user posted a newspaper clipping from an Ask Any column which had a rather strident reply.

"First, let's establish that I agree with your sister: Sex are a horrible person... perhaps this is something you could ponder from your church pew, because

despite your regular attendance, you don't seem to have learnt much," the agony aunt clipped back at a reader who complained about having to cater for her divorced, broke, working sister on a luxurious weekend away.

On a rather more serious note, in a research paper

published in the National Library of Medicine website, a team of researchers sought to explore how both the contributors and agony aunts themselves positioned HIV in relation to drinks relating to love, partnership and sex.

The research paper is titled *A narrative analysis positioning HIV relative to personal (non)sexual relationship challenges in an agony aunt column in the Western Cape, SA — Auntiness's "love advice"*.

An extract from the research

paper reads: "The column is published in a South African, Afrikaans-language newspaper *Sos*, prioritising sensationalist news items. Letters addressed HIV in these ways... experiences... direct questions about prevention... and scenarios where HIV could from a public health perspective) have been the main concern, but everyday issues took precedence.

"The majority of letters fell into this latter category where the writers focused on the immediate concerns of good sexual relations, problems related to love and monogamous relationships, good moral behaviour of others, and issues of oppressive life conditions rather than on HIV directly."

Adams also weighed in here, adding there would always be a concern for potential harm when readers just took information in, accepting it to be true, without discrimination.

"Issues of mental and physical health in particular require more evidence-based interventions and thus need to be handled with extreme caution to prevent unintentional harm," she said.

Then come the nutritional advice blogs, often amateurs loaded with sometimes incorrect information on eating disorders and nutritional plans, with some referencing wildly popular, but fat, celebrity diets.

Betha Harms, a registered dietitian and Association for Dietetics in SA spokesperson, cautioned: "There is a reason Instagram and Pinterest decided to restrict unqualified influencers to promote weight loss products and share bogus nutritional information."

"Following diet and nutrition advice that is not based on sound research and evidence is less likely to be effective, and can pose a threat to your health and may cause harm, both short term and in the long run."

Her recommendation is simple. Before consuming nutritional advice from any columnist, blogger, vlogger or social media guru: look out for the term "dietician" as it's a protected term in SA.

"If you are uncertain, check if they are registered with the Health Professions Council of SA."

Still keen to send that letter to your agony aunt of choice? Take my advice, nothing beats a no-holds-barred conversation between friends over a cup of tea.