

## **'The context of mental health difficulties and well being'.**

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**Synopsis:** Mental health and well being depend very much on people's social context and stage of their life cycle. Thus, for people from ethnic minority communities, the issues are different for children, young people, older people and elderly people, men and women. Furthermore, the wider social context plays an important part.

### **Introduction**

This talk will focus on the context of well being and mental health difficulties for people from Asian communities, taken here to refer to those who identify with, or whose countries are in, the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka). These communities are not homogenous, but rather embrace diverse religions, languages, cultural traditions, places of origin, and experiences of life in the UK.

Nevertheless they share, to different degrees, particular social conditions in the UK, and racism within the host community. This social context influences life experiences, including those of well being and mental health. Furthermore, there are cultural and philosophical differences between the East and the West in terms of the meaning of 'self' and notions such as dependency and independence. 'Self' and 'independence' are key concepts within Western conceptions of well being and mental health, and the differences in how they are understood run through experiences of life in the UK, including well being and mental health.

Thus we can see that social conditions, including racism, and concept of 'self' and 'independence' will influence well being: however they do so differently at different life stages; differently for different communities and differently for different families and individuals within communities.

## **Children**

Let us look at children. Children in some Asian communities live in some of the worst poverty in the UK, with all the stresses and strains that this causes. Sometimes families will lack the kinds of supports they would have within families and neighbourhoods in the mother country, and are isolated. Furthermore, professionals of many different persuasions may not understand South Asian approaches to child rearing, which stress affection and indulgence to a later age than would be expected in the West, with, sometimes, an abrupt cessation of demonstrable affection at a particular age.

## **Adolescents**

Adolescents present different kinds of problems. It is at adolescence that some of the tensions between different cultural values underpinning concepts of independence grow stronger. Families may or may be keen to instil traditional cultural and/or religious values in their young people. Strongly religious influences will sometimes be at odds with families' desires for greater assimilation (or not). Teenagers are caught in the middle of what, for some, will be a number of different and competing value systems, within which they have to try and forge an identity and concept of who they are in the world. Furthermore racist expressions may be more markedly directed at them at this time. There is some evidence that suicide and self-harm rates for young Asian women (including young married women) are higher than the general population, although rates differ between groups. Reasons for this have included experience of racism, cultural conflicts and 'disciplinary crises with parents'. However there is also the suggestion that increased rates in the UK reflect increased rates in the mother countries. Nevertheless it is a cause for concern.

## **Adults**

As adults, the spheres of both marriage and work influence well being and mental health.

Different expectations of marriage between partners causes strain. Sometimes there are incongruent values between partners or families of the husband and wife. In some groups, where a marriage partner has moved to the UK from the mother country, the more progressive attitudes (especially as regards women's roles) present on the Subcontinent are not reflected here. Instead they find stronger expectations to observe older traditional cultural practices. At other times it is the other way round. Partly it depends on class/caste and urban/rural experiences in the mother country. Language differences may make life even more difficult. English may not be spoken. In addition, if help is sought for mental health difficulties, the idioms used to describe feelings may be unfamiliar.

In many new families, there are tensions between men and women's roles, and these tensions can be particularly strong if the woman is highly educated, but on marriage is expected not to work – or even to work but still undertake all the traditional family hospitality functions. The practices of women moving into their parents-in-law's homes on marriage can also create tensions, particularly if they do not get on particularly well. The notion of women's independence takes on different meanings in different families and communities.

In some communities divorce is unacceptable: but if the marriage is intolerable it may be the only option. Either or both partners may then lose the support of their communities. The concept of 'shame' influences decisions and pressures to stay in intolerable marriages, and influences the well being of those who leave such marriages. The prevalence of domestic violence is not really known in Asian families, partly because the 'shame' of admitting to it within the family or community is so great. However, we know it exists and there are a number of attempts currently to raise awareness of the issues, and to provide appropriate services. Similarly, alcohol abuse (often linked with violence) is becoming recognised as a problem within some communities. It can be difficult to admit to problems within families and communities, as people do not always trust that professional from within the communities will adhere to principles of confidentiality. Furthermore, many people from Asian communities present physical symptoms for psychological problems – with the result that the underlying psychological problems go unrecognised.

The workplace is another source of strain. Women in dual career families experience the tension between themselves in their careers, and the expectations of them as women to observe traditional extended family functions, including a large amount of cooking. People within some communities work for very low pay and in poor working conditions. Alongside this goes poor quality housing, and isolation - all risk factors for poor mental health.

Social and economic conditions can mean that businesses can fail and, once again, the 'shame' factor comes into the experience of bankruptcy or unemployment. Indeed in Asian communities, unemployment is high, and even in work many people experience discrimination on a regular basis. These difficulties may be particularly acute for men, although women living in poverty and poor housing are more likely to experience depressive episodes than men. A recent national survey indicated those from Bangladeshi communities were least likely to be anxious or depressed, but it is unclear whether this was because of difficulties in gaining the necessary information.

A further strain for adults is the increasing difficulty they may experience with the expectations and behaviour of their children. What with pressure from elders and from younger members of the family, adults may experience being sandwiched between problems to do with cultural conflicts and the generation gap, twice over.

## **Elders**

Elders experience different kinds of problems, again linked to the social conditions and their concepts of 'self'. The largest group living in poverty in the UK are people of pensionable age. The situation is worse for many Asian elders as they may not be eligible for either a pension or state benefits. The number of two generation households amongst Asian communities is high and if housing is poor this puts further strain on families. Sometimes an elder will not speak English and children or other family members have to act as translators. If families cannot care for their elders, they will encounter unfamiliar models of care which seek to maintain independence, when it is dependence that may be valued. The circumstances of elders' migration to the UK might mean that some will have held close the expectation of returning home. In old age, they may be coming to terms with the fact that

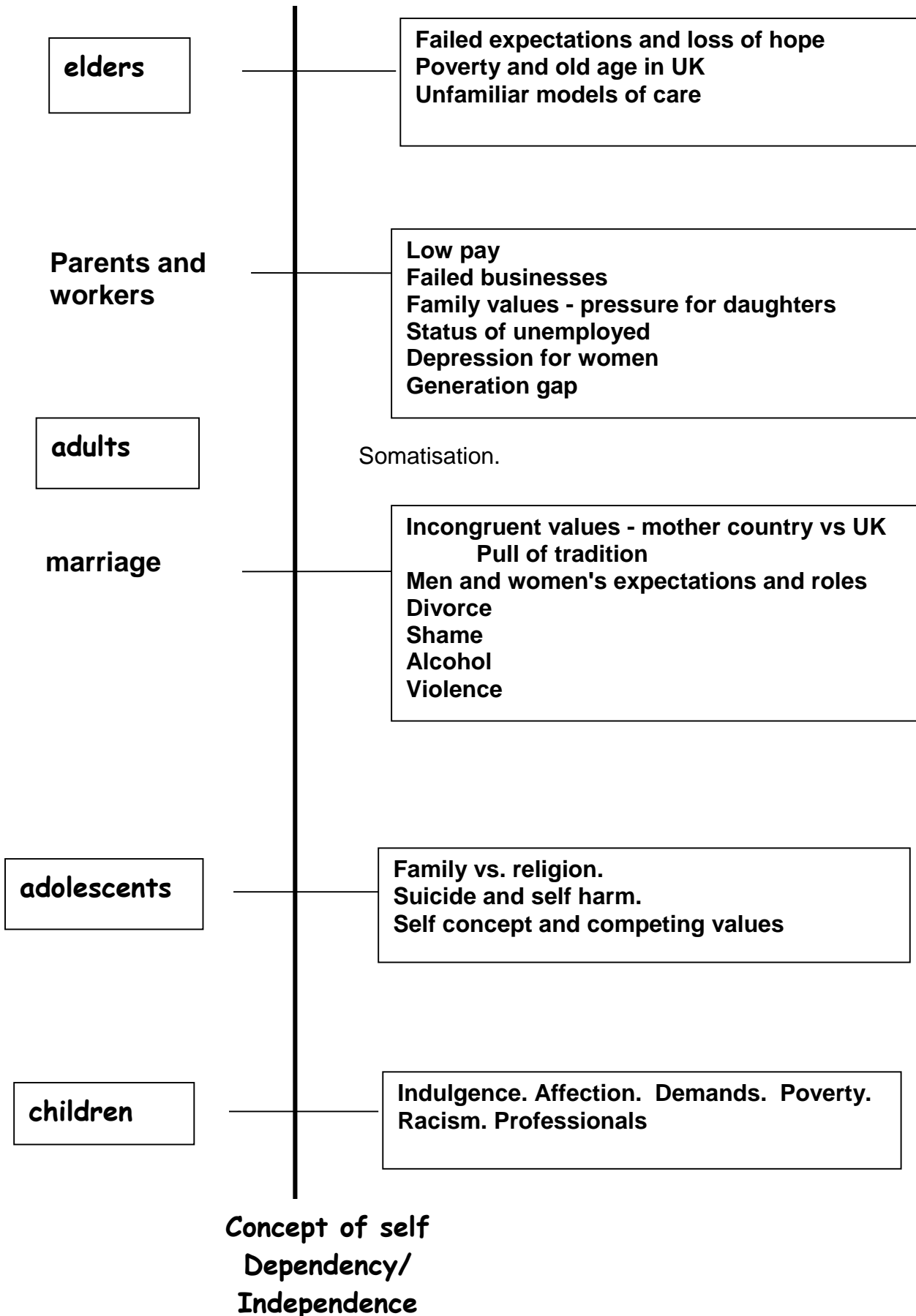
this is unlikely: their hopes and expectations remain unfulfilled and this contributes to misery.

## **Conclusion**

So, we can see that at different life stages, both the social conditions in which people live (including racism) and cultural conflicts in relation to concept of 'self' and identity, affect the well being and mental health of people from Asian communities in the UK. This is also the case, but in different ways, for people from other ethnic communities. The key to understanding and providing culturally sensitive and appropriate services, is to try to suspend preconceptions and the constraints of Western notions of well being and mental health, but instead to understand the social, cultural, religious and family contexts of any particular individual or family. Community outreach work will be needed, along with translation and interpretation services. Most importantly, support will be needed to develop the role of minority ethnic users of mental health services and of their representatives or groups.



**Racism**



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## Useful organisations

Individuals need information and support to feel confident to access and use services. There are some specific services, which offer help, information, support and counselling services to Asian people.

### **Asian Health and Social Care Association**

The Nursery, Easton Community Centre, Kilburn Street, Easton, Bristol  
BS5 6AW

tel: 0117 954 0178

Day services for elderly Asian people or those with physical or mental health problems.

### **Asian Resource Centre**

110-114 Hamstead Road, Handsworth, Birmingham B19 2QS

tel: 0121 551 4518

email: [asian.resource@btclick.com](mailto:asian.resource@btclick.com)

Advice and information; specialist advice for older Asian people and Asian women. Leaflets in Asian languages.

### **'AWAAZ' - Ethno – Sensitive Mental Health Project**

464 Cheetham Hill Road, Cheetham Hill, Manchester M8 9JW

tel: 0161 740 3273

Advice, information on treatments and alternative therapies, individual support and advocacy.

### **Black Mental Health Resource Centre**

Bushbury House, 4 Laurel Mount, St. Mary's Road, Leeds LS7 3JX

tel: 0113 237 4229

Advice, information, counselling and support for people from the Caribbean, Asian and African Communities.

### **Black Orchid**

First Floor, 189c Newfoundland Road, Bristol BS2 9NY

tel: 0117 907 9982

email: [black@orchid189c.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:black@orchid189c.fsnet.co.uk)

Support, advice and advocacy for black and Asian mental health service users, with a holistic approach to mental health issues.

### **Confederation of Indian Organisations (UK)**

5 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7XW

tel: 020 7928 9889

email: [cioheadoffice@aol.com](mailto:cioheadoffice@aol.com)

Umbrella body which aims to represent the needs of the South Asian community in the UK. Vishwas Project (in Southwark and Lambeth) aims to ensure that Asian women with mental health problems have access to appropriate information and support services.

### **Diverse Minds**

Mind's Black and Minority Ethnic Unit

15-19 Broadway, Stratford, London E15 4BQ

tel: 0208 215 2218

website: [www.mind.org.uk/diverseinds/information.asp](http://www.mind.org.uk/diverseinds/information.asp)

Working to ensure that mental health services are responsive to the needs of people from Black and minority ethnic communities.

### **Karma-Nirvana – Asian Women's Health Project**

Unit 39, Rosehill Business Centre, Normanton Road, Derby DE23 6RH

tel: 01332 604098/299166

email: [kirma.nirvana@btinternet.com](mailto:kirma.nirvana@btinternet.com)

Range of services promoting the health and well being of South Asian women. Befriending, advocacy and friendship groups.

### **Mental Health Foundation**

37 Mortimer Street, London W1n 8JU

020 7580 0145

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

Information and research on best practice and innovative services. Has fact sheets

**Mental Health Shop**

40 Chandos Street, Leicester, LE2 1BL

tel: 01162 471 525

email: [bmhgrc.mhs@care4free.net](mailto:bmhgrc.mhs@care4free.net)

Advice, information, advocacy and support for people with mental health problems and their carers. Also offers a service to in-patients in psychiatric hospitals and units outside Leicester.

**MIND The national Association for Mental Health**

15-19 Broadway, Stratford, London E15 4BQ

tel: 0208 215 2218

website: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Campaigning group for better mental health services and awareness. Has fact sheets.

**Nai Zindagi Project**

Stonebridge Centre, Cardiff Street, Carlton Road, Nottingham NG3 2FH

tel: 0115 941 4255

Counselling, advice and information for Asian women with mental health difficulties. Carers' group for Asian women carers. All services available in Asian languages.

**Qualb Centre**

17 Forest Drive West, Leytonstone, London E11 1JZ

tel: 020 8558 6241

email: [thequalbcentre@hotmail.com](mailto:thequalbcentre@hotmail.com)

Counselling and complementary therapies for Asian people with emotional problems or difficulties with domestic violence. Support group for women.

**Rethink Severe Mental Illness**

(formerly The National Schizophrenia Fellowship)

28 Castle Street, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, KT1 1SS

tel: 020 8974 6814

email: [advice@nsf.org.uk](mailto:advice@nsf.org.uk)

website: [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

Advice service providing information on mental illness issues. Central office for a network of over 300 projects in the UK.

**Rethink Severe Mental Illness – Sahayak Asian Befriending Project**

4-5 High Street, Gravesend DA11 0BQ

tel: 01474 364 837

Befriending service for Asian people aged 16 and over with mental health problems or who are experiencing emotional distress. Assistance with accessing mental health services. Promotion of mental health awareness within the Asian communities.

**Sahara – Asian Women's Group**

Youth Workshop, Stanley Street South, Bolton

tel: 01204 337 550

email: [andy@band.org.uk](mailto:andy@band.org.uk)

website: [www.band.org.uk](http://www.band.org.uk)

Social, recreational and educational activities for Asian women with mental health problems.

**Sathi – Asian Men's Group**

Socialist Club, Wood Street, Bolton BL6 6BN

tel: 01204 337 030

email: [andy@band.org.uk](mailto:andy@band.org.uk)

website: [www.band.org.uk](http://www.band.org.uk)

Social, recreational and educational activities for Asian men with mental health problems.

**Tulip Mental Health Group**

Unit 3, System House, Deanery Road, Stratford, London E15 4LT

Tel: 020 8519 1194

Range of support services and recreational activities for people with mental health problems including Asian women's and men's groups.

## Mann ki Baat

### **Error! Unknown switch argument.**

A video about mental health problems in Asian communities presented by Bollywood star Dharmendra Deol. This video challenges the idea that mental health problems are something to be ashamed of. It promotes discussion of mental health through interviews with people who have experienced mental health problems describing their experiences and how they have coped. The video comes with a booklet that provides information about mental health and where to go for help and support. This video is an essential resource for people working with Asian communities.

**Produced:** Mental Health Media/North Birmingham Mental Health NHS Trust, 2000

**Format:** 20 mins VHS video + booklet. Available in Bengali, English, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu

**Price:** £74.95 each

Concessionary price: £49.95 each

Quantity discounts are available.

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<http://www.mhmedia.com>

## Talking about Suicide

### **Error! Unknown switch argument.**

The rate of attempted suicide in young Asian women is among the highest in the UK. *Talking about Suicide* is a video to encourage people to talk about the stress which Asian families face, and to end the kind of isolation which can lead young women to take this drastic step.

*Talking about Suicide* is presented by Saaed Jaffrey and Meera Syal. They look at the issues surrounding this difficult subject through a drama telling one family's story: a family with three

children, Ayeesha, Kashif and Parveen. At first things are going well: Ayeesha has exceptional exam results, Kashif is getting married and Parveen is pregnant. But when Ayeesha tries to deceive her parents over her choice of A levels and Parveen's husband takes a big gamble on his business, the pressure begins to build on both young women. The drama follows each person's thoughts so that the viewer can understand and identify with each character.

As the situation intensifies, the presenters, with the help of Asian health and youth workers, look at some of the steps they could take to communicate, resolve their differences, reduce their stress levels and problems leading to a crisis. The video adopts a serious but positive approach to an issue which is surrounded by silence.

**Produced:** Realta/Northern Birmingham Mental Health NHS Trust, 2000

**Format:** 58 mins VHS video + booklet. Available in Punjabi, Gujarati and Bengali (Sylheti dialect) all with English subtitles

**Price:** £74.95 each Concessionary price: £49.95 each

Quantity discounts are available.

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