



Eating Disorders (EDs) among the South Asian British Population...

A Personal Reflection by a South-Asian British Recovering Anorexic

From a young age, I've spent my life fighting Anorexia Nervosa, a serious psychological Eating Disorder. Even now I find it difficult to articulate how deadly this Eating Disorder is.

As a South-Asian British recovering anorexic I've experienced first-hand the culture surrounding mental illness within my community. Rather than being seen as a real illness that warrants the same attention and level of care as physical ailments, Eating Disorders are frequently dismissed and denied. Sufferers are often stigmatised or silenced.

It is empowering to share my personal journey of survival and recovery. It refutes the stereotype of Eating Disorders affecting only young, affluent, white women. In reality, Eating Disorders affect people of all genders, ethnic groups and ages. However, the experience for sufferers in a BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) community can be very different.

Mental illnesses remain a taboo topic in many BAME communitiesⁱ. Girls and women in the South-Asian community face cultural and societal pressures which can trigger or exacerbate disordered eating habits and behaviours. The female role carries an expectation to look good. Being light-skinned and thin is seen as necessary to be considered attractive. Furthermore, it's common in these communities to have family, friends and relatives commenting on one's physical appearance.

Food plays a major role in South-Asian culture, and this presents a challenge for anyone with an Eating Disorder. Gatherings of family and friends invariably focus on food, and there is a strong expectation to socialise and eat. Those who do not partake are seen as antisocial and their motives are misunderstood.

Eating Disorders are often denied in my community. Family and friends can't grasp why you can't eat, and can exert overwhelming pressure. They assume you're not eating on purpose, to disobey or spite them. You're accused of not listening, of being dismissive of their wishes. They can't understand that you want to please them but there is something compelling you not to eat.

Even when mental illnesses are acknowledged, South-Asian British people face unique barriers to seeking treatmentⁱⁱ. Even after diagnosis, sufferers may not want to visit the doctor because they worry that the illness will be seen by their family as failure in parenting or upbringing. They fear it will adversely impact their education and they will fail to meet parental expectations.

In order to bring about positive change, we need to encourage a compassionate, understanding society where people feel able to talk about their illness. We need to ensure a greater understanding of the complexities of Eating Disorders and the associated mental health difficulties. Literature and research on Eating Disorders amongst the South Asian population in Britain are limitedⁱⁱⁱ, resulting in ignorance and misunderstanding of the condition. We need to be creative in how we campaign to create better awareness of Eating Disorders within BAME communities, for example, forming inclusive support groups, finding BAME celebrities to share their experiences and using local communication platforms to highlight the condition and available treatments. This could help to reduce healthcare inequalities and impress upon our community that Eating Disorders are real, complex, and devastating conditions with serious, sometimes fatal, consequences. The earlier treatment is sought, the better the sufferer's chance of recovery^{iv}.

EATING DISORDERS IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES



African American teenagers are 50% more likely to exhibit bulimic (binge and purge) behaviors than white teenagers.

SOURCE: NATIONAL EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION



People of color are significantly less likely to be asked about eating disorder symptoms by a doctor even if they have disclosed eating and weight concerns.



SOURCE: NATIONAL EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION



In a study, Asian, Black, Hispanic and Caucasian youth all reported attempting to lose weight at similar rates.

SOURCE: NATIONAL EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION



Researchers found that Hispanic adolescents were significantly more likely to have bulimia nervosa than their non-Hispanic peers.



SOURCE: NATIONAL EATING DISORDERS ASSOCIATION



Black and Hispanic women have been found to have elevated risks for developing binge eating disorder.

SOURCE: EATING DISORDERS REVIEW



As a recovering anorexic I've learnt that quality of life is more important than how I look. Eating Disorders are far from trivial and I'm compassionate towards myself during recovery, I don't judge my past battles and I don't feel ashamed of my struggles.

Eating Disorders do not discriminate. Nor are they obvious in presentation. I'm passionate about creating the right support and understanding from our society, raising greater awareness, eradicating the stigma associated with Mental Health and to reduce misconceptions.

Citing Literature

End Notes:

ⁱ **Mental Health Foundation » Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. » [2019] »**

Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/b/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-bame-communities> [Accessed 2020].

ⁱⁱ **Mental Health Foundation » Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. » [2019] »**

Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/b/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-bame-communities> [Accessed 2020].

ⁱⁱⁱ **John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and Eating Disorders Association. » [2010] »**

Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/erv.1033> and, »

Journal: **Exploring barriers to South Asian help-seeking for eating disorders, Mental Health Review Journal**, 10.1108/MHRJ-09-2016-0017, **22**, 1, (40-50), (2017).

Cross ref [Accessed 2020].

^{iv} **Beat Eating Disorders - GP-Briefing-Document » [2017] »**

Early intervention on eating disorders. The crucial role of GPs.

Available at: <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/uploads/documents/2018/5/gp-briefing-document.pdf> [Accessed 2020].