

Beyond the Stigma

“Lok Ki Kehnge?”

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Foreword

Hi, I am Gillian Douglas, the Director for Housing at Sandwell Council. Within my directorate I have a range of teams that support the community and voluntary sector to develop and deliver services for local communities. We work with the voluntary sector to strengthen our communities and codesign services according to priorities and needs within the community. One of the areas of need is having good mental health, which is central to our wellbeing and to do this we need to build strong and resilient communities. In addition, we know the impact and restrictions imposed as a result of Covid 19 has further influenced our lives. It has also further impacted upon inequalities within minority ethnic communities.

Different communities understand and talk about mental health in different ways. In some communities, mental health difficulties are rarely spoken about and can be seen in a negative light. This project, *Beyond the Stigma*, focuses on South Asian women and their mental health, and has used poetry to connect and encourage the sharing of stories, as well to challenge myths and prejudices. We know this is an area that is not always openly talked about and it is important that we encourage such voices and listen and learn from them, as this will enable us to have some understanding of how services can be better shaped.

Through this project, Changing Our Lives have built positive and trusting relationships with the women involved, and in turn they have shared their arresting stories within this book. I would like to take the opportunity to thank Changing Our Lives. It has been a privilege to listen to the powerful stories taking place within communities and we, as a Council, are keen to continue working with our diverse communities.

Gillian Douglas, Director for Housing, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council



Introduction

Beyond the Stigma brought together South Asian women from across Sandwell to share their stories in order to challenge the stigma that surrounds mental health within their communities and encourage others to engage in the conversation. Having good mental health is central to our wellbeing and building strong and resilient communities plays a vital role in this.

As part of the project Changing Our Lives facilitated virtual creative workshops with award winning poet and spoken word artist, Shareefa Energy (<https://www.shareefaenergy.com>), to explore how the arts can be a powerful way to share experiences and challenge myths. The workshops supported self-expression and celebrated identity and value, giving women the opportunity to explore ideas and develop their own writing and creative work.

This collection was developed by local women during the course of the coronavirus pandemic, a time in which mental health became a hot topic of conversation. Though conversations about mental health are more commonplace in the UK today, we know through our work, there is still widespread stigma within South Asian communities.

Each story is an individual's journey written in their own words and may include experiences of self-harm, suicide, depression, eating disorders, and substance misuse. The way these women have experienced mental health difficulties is no different to the rest of society. However, their encounter is often set against a background of cultural expectations which include pressures from family relating to gender biased customs.

I am a thirty-two-year-old Punjabi woman
and I have **only just discovered who I am.**

I am a **powerful, vocal** and **funny** woman.

I am three words that ***I shouldn't be.***

Do I care? ***No!***

Did I care? ***Hell yes!***

I was brought up - ***no - moulded*** to be the *good little housewife.*

Now, don't get me wrong, I am an **amazing** wife and mother.

But I am **not defined** by these roles...

I AM ME.



Let me take you back a bit. 2009; I was in love with JLS and my t-shirts screamed slogans I longed to say.

On the outside, I was laughing. On the inside, I was crying.

I worked long hours and tired was my trend. I was tired, all day every day. I was not focused, I drifted off in conversations. I didn't eat properly and I didn't want to talk to anybody.

I booked a doctor's appointment: "Depression" he said.

I had laughed, "*Me, never!*"



He had known me since I was a baby, I knew he wouldn't just diagnose me for the sake of it. He gave me some options.

Now, if I can insert here - I knew what mental health was, but at the same time, *I didn't know what mental health was.*

We weren't discussing it at the dinner table and it wasn't taught at school. I was quite oblivious to it, it felt like something out of fictional tales. Growing up, if you were sad, you had to make sure no one realised you were sad.

I think I could have won every award going for acting and opened my own drama school!

Back to where I was; my options were medication and therapy, you know those “happy pills” (I hate that phrase). I never felt happy on them. They never gave me the get-up-and-go feeling. Instead, I gained weight and I felt even more rubbish.

I’m going to interject again - my weight has always been an issue for me. My weight yo-yos more than the stock market. Since my early teens it had always been a sore subject for me. There were constant jibes by several family members.

When the prospect of marriage came around, it was as if someone had loaded a gun with fat-shaming ammunition and fired it at me all at once.

So, I lost weight and by that, I mean I lost weight. Between, 2012-2014, I was at the lowest weight I’ve ever been. Did anyone ask me if I was happy? No, they then worried that I was too thin. *Ha, irony at its finest!*

From 2009 up to 2014, I was in therapy, in secret, on and off for all those years. I couldn’t tell anyone about it (except my husband).

I knew the questions would be:

- “What’s wrong with you?”
- “Why are you talking to this person?”
- “What is this person telling you to do?”
- “Why don’t we just go to the temple and pray?”
- “How do you know this person isn’t telling everyone your business?”

But, let me tell you this, from therapy, I learnt:

- My self-worth
- My confidence
- To recognise what is good for me
- To express my feelings
- That other people are scared of a Punjabi woman who knows her worth!

This is stigma

Stigma originates from the Greek word 'steizen', which was used to describe a mark, likened to a tattoo, that was smeared on morally inadequate people. Stigma is classed as an attribute that is *"deeply discrediting, a deviance that allows others to pass judgement and a characteristic of persons that is, contrary to a norm of a social unit."* In layman's terms, it is *just something we don't want to talk or hear about.*

Question: Why is mental health stigma such an issue in the South Asian community?

Answer 1: Intergenerational Trauma

Search it, read about it, become aware of it.

It doesn't just exist in our communities, but it prospers in our communities because those norms and those values passed down to us, seemingly to keep our culture and traditions alive, have taught us to suffer in silence.

Answer 2: Lok Ki Kehnge ("What will people say?")

It is my mission to have this phrase ingrained in your memory for the right reasons. For too long, has it sat comfortable on the tongues of our families.

It regulates our life choices to keep us in the tight-fitting mould of the "brown female". Mental health doesn't fit in that mould - just let that sink in!

Answer 3: We have been brought up with 'family doctors'

They have been our doctors since birth and the whole family (and the dog, if they could!) is registered with said doctor.

So, why are you going to go to that doctor and tell them your mental health is not good when you won't even go and have a check-up of your lady parts?!

Instead, why not sit in your room and cry yourself to sleep because, that makes you feel better, right? Why not cut yourself because, you deserve it, right?

The doctor is just going to tell your parents anyway... not that they have any confidentiality rules to comply with or anything!

Answer 4: GOD, Rab, Allah, Baba Ji, Bhagavan, Sri (and many more, I'm sure)

All our answers must be found with God. Pray and God will make it better. God sees all and cures all.

But where is God when we are feeling so down, when we don't think straight and find no option but to end our life?

Now, I am not denouncing any faith in God. I just wish it wasn't seen as the only option to go and pray when life has just become a little too much for our minds to handle.

Answer 5: The most important one of all - We must find our own answer.

My answer was an amalgamation of all of the above and more. I worked on myself through therapy and learnt how to undo all those years of hurt and miscommunication.

The journey doesn't stop when therapy ends, it merely changes direction and the journey becomes more fruitful.

My journey of therapy is over but my journey of learning about stigma and helping to undo those ancient reigns on our lives continues; it has taken many twists and turns but the message remains the same.

We must find our own answer.

This is what I do

Working in the field of mental health support wasn't always my pathway of choice. Alongside my own journey, I discovered a desire to help people to overcome the challenges in their life. I was working in a medical practice, supporting the GP with mental health reviews. I was feeling a strong urge to help these patients beyond the consultation room because most of the time I wasn't seeing them again. This spurred me to think about my long term work prospects.

At the age of twenty-six, I began my university degree with a one-year old in tow. It was the hardest journey for three years. I battled with myself every day.

"Am I a good mother?"

"Should I be doing this right now?"

I had these thoughts every single day until my graduation when I saw my son's face and I saw the absolute pride in his smile.

Now, I am a qualified counsellor in a private practice and I also work for a local mental health and well-being charity to support people in the community.

There's people who would rather that I didn't work in this field.

It's easier for them to tell people that I'm a doctor than to try and explain something they don't understand or don't want to understand. The thought of people telling me their problems and me being able to help them find solutions is daunting to them.

They would prefer I didn't listen and I was another person who just left them to it because it is their business and no one should be telling other people their business!

But, here's me, listening and supporting and guiding people to the light at the end of the tunnel.



Butterfly

*I am a butterfly sitting on a lotus flower
The wind brushing past me
I have reincarnated
The colours define me
Pink, Blue, Purple, Green
Happiness, Sadness, Turmoil and Freedom
I am the only butterfly I have seen
My two wings do not meet
The darkness versus the light
The old me versus the new me
The lotus flower is stable
Because it had to rise from beneath
That's why it is my foundation
Now that I am free*

- Laddi

My Brown Skin Shame

*The colour of my skin is not a sin.
Neither is my quest for meaning.
Why do we still fight these battles?
When really we should be healing.
My parents tell me God is watching.
Why doesn't he stop these people?
The hatred tries to introvert me.
It's like they're watching through the eye of a needle.*

*Has the colour of my skin become a sin?
Do I still have a quest for meaning?
Did they need to do anything else?
Or did I do all the quarantining?*

- Laddi

The Mirror

*There is a girl staring at me
Five foot five, brown eyes
With a soul so deep*

*There is a girl staring at me
A smile so bright
With tears that bleed*

*There is a girl staring at me
In the prime of her life
But wants to be set free*

There was a girl staring at me

- Laddi

Prab

My Journey



Mental health stigma

Mental health is something we all have. FACT.

Mental health difficulties are something that we will experience. Yet in the South Asian community it is still something that is not as accepted as it should be. There is still the stigma that 'depression' means that someone will kill themselves or that they are 'crazy'. People don't see the daily impact of depression, or the fact that their loved one needs support. They do not need people to treat them differently, as though they are possessed.

In our community, the saddest thing is that people are not open to others sharing their mental health difficulties. They believe that mental health is the same, and so once they hear one person's journey they believe this will be everyone's journey. Everyone's experience of mental health is different, but this is something that is not truly understood.

The opportunity to speak out is just not there.

The opportunity to be understood is pretty much non-existent.

Not many people in the South Asian community want to talk about it, not many people in the South Asian community want to understand it, and not many people in the South Asian community want to really learn.

So the stigma keeps occurring.

My story

I remember being 16 and waking up one morning feeling 'fat'. I started counting my calories, and started to exercise 2 hours a day. Every night I went onto the scales and was happy to have lost 2lbs every single day. At one point I would eat half a bowl of cereal a day and then exercise. My family just thought I had stopped eating, not linking this with eating disorders. So this carried on for 2 whole months. I had lost weight and I was happy. Around about this time certain noises would anger me, such as people chewing food with their mouths open. My family would get angry at me, not realising I had now also developed something called Misophonia. My moods had changed and I was constantly crying and having suicidal thoughts. I hated life and it felt so bleak. This was depression. I then started university and turned to alcohol because I hated who I was. I hated eating and I wasn't sure why. I started to drink to hide my depression, as it was the only time I was 'happy'. It was at this age, 18, that I finally got the diagnosis of anorexia, depression and anxiety.



Yet, this diagnosis was a double edged sword. No-one seemed to understand me and my mental health difficulties. They used to say that it was my excuse for my behaviour. They made me feel bad. My ex-partners would also use my mental health diagnosis against me, blaming me for things and then saying *"you're mentally ill anyway, it's your fault"*. Or telling others *"she has mental issues"*.

I would also hide from this too. This diagnosis. I was not open about it. I was tired of all the looks I received and the way I was treated. It is only in the last year that I am open about my journey and happy to tell others what I have been through to educate them about what mental health is. I am only one person, but if I can eliminate even one person's judgement and stigma, then I am happy with this.

*I grew up Sikh, in an Indian Culture,
When I felt down people thought
Let's not approach her.*

*They thought there was something
wrong with my head,
But told me to get up
and get out of bed.*

*'What is mental illness?' they once asked me,
So I took them on a journey and got them to see.*

*Today it's more accepted,
But more has to be done*

*So let's all join together
And become as one.*

- Prab

Mental health services

Through my journey, I found one thing. Counselling and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) are not culturally sensitive. My counsellor said to me "talk about this with your family", and I remember saying "you don't understand Punjabi families if this is your advice". I think a lot needs to be done when it comes to therapy and making it more culturally sensitive. I also think there needs to be awareness and less barriers for South Asian communities. This means working in conjunction with those who have influence within the community to normalise mental health, such as working with religious establishments to promote mental health awareness and access to services.

Gina

I never give up



About me

I believe it's important to acknowledge what's possible. I never give up. I don't want anyone to go through the same experiences that I went through. At school I never really fitted in, and I was bullied a lot. When I was younger, I felt low and depressed. I didn't know what direction I wanted to take in life, and I felt like I was a failure. Now I am an ambitious young woman who has big dreams and is success driven. I've personally gone from being an introverted person to a confident young woman who doesn't like to take no as an answer!

My journey began with Changing Our Lives when I was 15. I completed a work experience placement and got involved with various projects and my connection with the organisation flourished from there. Through working with Changing Our Lives, it made me realise that there was more out there and I could achieve anything. It pushed me beyond my limits. I'll always be eternally grateful to Changing Our Lives for starting my journey off and giving me opportunities.

In July 2019, I applied to be a board member of the West Midlands Young Combined Authority (YCA). I was successful with my application and I began my journey with YCA in September of the same of the year. (This is a youth leadership programme where members work alongside the West Midlands Combined Authority to spark change for all young people across the region.)

Due to my age, my time as a board member is coming to an end. Overall, in my time working with my YCA colleagues, we have achieved so much. But if I must give two big achievements that I am proud of, one would be a Vision Report that we produced with a few different organisations with aims to improve youth inclusion, one of these areas was in fact mental health. The other was a podcast on disability awareness to mark Disability History Month which I hosted and shared my lived experience of being a young disabled woman alongside other members. Through the programme, I made friends of my own age. My friends have got my back and I've never had that in my life. I reflect on this in a blog I have written [here](#).

Last year at YCA, we ran a social media campaign for Mental Health Awareness Week, and we recorded a podcast on mental health and how lockdown had impacted young people. The conversation on the podcast was emotional and we made a big impact. It made me open about things and it was a confidence boost.

When I worked for Changing Our Lives, I used to do a lot of public speaking events which never seemed to get me nervous. However, in the past few years, public speaking has become something I fear. In fact, I can recall a couple of events recently where I completely failed! I decided I wanted to do a TEDx Talk to step outside of my comfort zone and to show everyone that I could do public speaking. Before I was officially announced as a speaker, only a few people knew, including a friend (a fellow TEDx Speaker on the day) and a couple of my employment support workers. All of these people helped and guided me along my journey which enabled me to give the best performance of my life.

Looking back on the day, I'm so proud that I did it. I achieved my aims which were to make people smile, make them laugh, overcome my fear and to impress my friend who supported me throughout my journey which looking back on the day now, I know I did! My friend was smiling from ear to ear and congratulated me on my achievement. I feel like the world is my oyster now. I know I can do anything and everything I put my mind to. I've written a blog describing my experiences from the day which can be viewed [here](#).

Mental Health struggles during the pandemic

Regardless of ethnicity, disability or any label in general, the global pandemic has had an impact on everyone's life especially in terms of mental health. We've all experienced different challenges because of the pandemic and I guess it's taught us a lot as people.

However, for me, when lockdown first hit the UK, my mental health was deeply impacted as I was shielding and I feared getting the virus. I was scared to leave my home even for medical appointments, everywhere I went I travelled with my mum. I rarely went out as most things were delivered. Just like everyone else, nearly all medical appointments were done over the phone.

Mental Health Stigma

The truth is, for some people in the South Asian community, there is no such thing as mental health. Mental health isn't talked about, it isn't recognised.

Just the acknowledgment of it can be difficult. It's a taboo subject mainly. It's a strange kind of thing as it's different for everybody. Not everyone understands it. We're becoming more inclusive as a society, but it's not perfect. We all have mental health, but it can be difficult for people to talk about it.

I recently became a qualified mental health first aider. I found the course quite tough at times, particularly with the hard-hitting videos and topics. I'm proud to have completed the course because it was important to me as a member of the South Asian community. As stated above, mental health isn't talked about much. It was important to me not only for my professional working life but also my personal life as I want people within my community to have someone that they can relate to and know that support is out there if they need it.

There's been a lot of talk recently about how the pandemic has affected young people, disabled people as well as NHS workers. I work in the NHS myself which can be a high-pressure environment. By completing the course, I feel I have the knowledge and skills to not only support colleagues but friends and family. I am proud to say that I am a mental health first aider.



Mental Health Services

We all need support no matter what, but why is it so hard for disabled people to have the same opportunities as non-disabled people? Support should be accessible for everyone. Mental health services need to have the human touch. We need more of a human approach to things with more empathy. I've found that some counsellors can view things as a tick box exercise. I had telephone counselling during the pandemic, and I found their communication was very formal and showed a lack of understanding.

It was a very rigid system that didn't work for me. It wasn't adaptable and it was difficult to rearrange appointments if I needed to.

Health care professionals don't always get it right when they communicate with people. I used to hate going to the GP, avoiding it at all costs as I didn't feel like I was being listened to. It's only in the last few months since working for the NHS, that I've realised they struggle adapt their approach to people because they are overwhelmed. We all experience challenging aspects in life and when you work in a healthcare setting it's no different, they can experience mental health issues too. Who can blame them? Especially with what we have gone through in this past year throughout the pandemic. As a society we expect a lot from our healthcare professionals, we expect them to get it right all the time, but now my eyes have been opened to the other side of things too.

My use of social media

Social media is good and bad. There's the good side of it where you're promoting awareness. But there's also the other side where people boast about their lives, and they don't post about the negatives.

These past few months I've enjoyed using Instagram. I don't use it to showcase how brilliant my life is; I use it to raise awareness. I talk about how my disability affects me and I share a lot of quotes. I'm not your typical young person, I don't put my whole life on there. I'm passionate about raising awareness of various topics, such as disability awareness and mental health awareness. For instance, when it was Epilepsy Day, I decided to put a small chunk of a video on Instagram and Facebook of me having a seizure. Everyone was taken aback by it. But the overall support I had was fantastic and I didn't really expect to get the outcome I had because I had amazing comments, and everyone was supportive. Like mental health, epilepsy is a taboo. Unless you go through it, you don't know what it's like.

I'm also quite big on LinkedIn now, although it is more of a work based social platform, I also like to use it to raise awareness of disability and mental health. Most recently, I went through a challenging situation because I am so busy; I got overwhelmed which had an impact on my mental health. I took a break, which helped me a lot because I could take a step back to focus on me.

“Reach out if you need it!” - my advice to you!

To end my piece, there is nothing wrong with admitting that you are struggling with your mental health, it's okay to have good and bad days, it's okay not to be okay. Regardless of who we are as people, we are all human at the end of the day. As a young woman who identifies as part of the Hindu religion and has both a physical disability and long-term medical condition, that has affected me mentally and physically, I am proud of the person I am. Despite the struggles and barriers I have faced with my mental health, it has made me a stronger person and the one that everyone sees me as today. If there's any advice I would give to you all reading my piece, it would be: if you are struggling, reach out to anyone, it could be a family member, a friend, a work colleague, a healthcare professional such as your GP, a support worker or anyone that you trust. Because it is okay to ask for help when you need it! There is no harm in it and there's nothing to feel ashamed of because we all have people that care about us and want us to do well in life. We all need support at some point in our lives.

What is stopping you?

“No matter how long I live for, I want my message to be heard everywhere! When I am gone, I want my legacy to carry on, where I am remembered for me, my voice and my passion.”



My name is Bally. I am a Sikh woman. I am an ex-nurse. I do voluntary work in the community and offer support where I can. This in turn helps me on my journey.

If I can help even just one person, I know I can make a big difference.

My journey

I was bullied for a long time in the workplace. I lost a lot of my life during this time, I felt as though I lived in a prison cell. Something I often say is, "I did the time but I didn't do the crime." I was lost in my own world and I couldn't see the light. But now I am on the other side, I am free.

I have since come a long way and I am passionate about talking about bullying and mental health, to raise awareness and to show people they are not alone. No one should feel ashamed. I talk about my journey to show others that you can get back on your feet and lead a full life. Each person's journey is different and you have to be determined. Keep going, don't give up and you will get there. Keep going! I am now strong-minded, quite content in life and tell myself "what is meant to be will be".

Stigma

Talking about mental health is the hardest part. I am now brave enough to come forward and talk about my journey. In the Asian community mental health is not ordinarily discussed, it remains behind closed doors and is a taboo subject. It's difficult because you can't see mental health and so it is kept hidden. If you do open up about mental health, people can think less of you. You are not valued in the same way as others. I took that big step and I was open about my mental health to encourage the community to get involved. However, you cannot please everybody and whatever step you choose to take, you will be wrong in someone's eyes. There is still a high level of judgment in my community, especially if you choose to steer away from the 'normal' path. It's as though if you are unique, something is not right. I always say "don't judge a book by its cover", and I encourage others to be open and understanding of everyone's individual journey.

My work

I set up Sandwell Asian Mental Health Group (SAMHG) 4 years ago. Prior to this, I was looking for mental health support and what I was looking for wasn't out there. I wanted support where there was an understanding of my culture and upbringing.

The support that was out there didn't understand where I was coming from, so I thought about setting something up myself and founded the group. I found that services were either specifically for women or for men but I decided to develop a group which supports both women and men.

This was a big barrier that I broke down.

Mental health services

I found it difficult when I couldn't relate to the services that were offered to me. I felt as though health professionals thought I was being picky when I asked for support from someone from an Asian background. This would have made me feel more at ease but there was a lack of support like this on offer. I stayed strong and kept voicing my needs and what I needed, but a lot needs to be done to change this in the future. I think it's great that in this project we have all used this platform to speak out and share our stories with others.

Depression

Isolation avoid the nation.

Lack of motivation.

Remain low in mood.

Not sleeping.

Not eating.

Avoid activities of daily living.

I am feeling sad.

But not going mad.

Time to get help and support.

Rehabilitation and medication.

How is one feeling on a scale from 0-10?

Five but still alive.

Command

control.

Remain calm and be free.

Family friends and society.

Live your life how you want it to be!

Freedom

Freedom

F R E E D O M !

- Bally

Nadia
Speak up



My story

Wow, where do I begin?

I am a 41-year-old mother to a beautiful, but challenging 9-year-old son. I grew up in Handsworth and although me and my son have our own house in Sandwell, we spend the majority of our time with my family in Handsworth.



I was born into an Islamic family, but made the choice that religion was not for me. However, I am very spiritual and believe that God guides me in my daily life.

I turn to God for answers.

I live my life in a way that I feel God would be proud of.

So how did I get here?

Well firstly, growing up as a young girl in Handsworth, I was more westernised than my family would have wanted, and coming from a family of strong, opinionated women, which included my mum, I stood my ground with what I believed was right for me.

That lead me to keep some experiences from my family members, as I didn't think they would understand. I ended up in some wrong places at some wrong times and experienced a series of traumatic events. Trying to process these events at the age of 13 was very difficult without help and unfortunately when I did share with an adult, the questions they asked me made me feel like I was at fault.

The above made me turn to substance misuse and self-harm in order to cope with how I was feeling emotionally. At the age of 14 having tried to deal with all the thoughts, emotions and feelings or at least mask the pain, I felt it was too much and I took an overdose in an attempt to end my pain.

Fast forward 22 years, and numerous periods of feeling overwhelmed, 4 attempts at counselling and 2 periods of being signed off with stress related illness by my GP, later, I was eventually diagnosed with anxiety, depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). I finally started to understand how my mind was working, I could now start getting the specialised support that I needed when I was 13.

It's sad to look back at now and list the number of adults that failed me, however I believe everything happens for a reason and my experience has fuelled me to try and ensure that the young people I work with, get the support they need as soon as possible.

I believe the above ultimately led me to be in the position I am in now, which is as the Founder and Director of Outreach for my not-for-profit organisation, *Mind Our Mentalities*.

Other than the above, there are 2 main factors that led to the birth of Mind Our Mentalities.

The first was my decision to quit my permanent, well paid job as Head of Year 11. This life altering decision came after being off work initially for 1 month with symptoms of severe anxiety and depression, but due to a lack of support on my return, I had no choice but to extend my sick leave for a further 2 months. During this time, I sought advice from the occupational health department through my employer. She advised that I could

return fit to work provided a few reasonable adjustments were made, adjustments the NHS recommend for employees with any mental health conditions. Unfortunately, my previous employers refused to make these adjustments and I had to choose my health over my wealth and stability.

The second contributing factor was the death of a young man that I worked with in a variety of settings over a period of 12/13 years. He was a young man, and one that anyone who had ever worked with, would have been proud of. He was so well mannered and gentlemanly. The last time we spoke it was about his current passion for events management, and how he was working with some local DJ's promoting events. I was surprised to hear he was not currently playing football, as I knew over the years I had known him, that was always the one thing he enjoyed, but I know that the older you become the harder it is to remain in the competitive game.

Unfortunately, this young man tragically passed away in April 2017, and I became unexpectedly, overwhelmed by his loss. My spirituality led me to believe that everything that happens in our lives happens for a reason and it was not just a coincidence that me and this young man had come across each other on so many different occasion. There was a reason that God had caused us to cross paths so many times. There was something we were supposed to learn and to me the only explanation became that I was meant to recognise the signs that he was unhappy and experiencing some negative emotions. God had tried to show me that he needed my help and I should have saved him... but I didn't. I failed him, I failed his family and I had failed God. God had given me a task and because of my failings this beautiful young spirit was no longer with us.

Having had the time to reflect, I now feel that this young man's death made me question my purpose and my effectiveness as a youth worker, educator, mentor and coach. So I decided I needed to put myself in a position to try my best to support other young people who are in similar positions, and give them a sense of direction. So this young man was actually sent into my life to save me and any work that I do as founder of Mind Our Mentalities can be credited to his spirit to move me.

I hope that spirit is ever present in my work.

Why is it important to share our stories with others?

It is so important for us to share our stories as there is a very high likelihood that someone else has had a similar journey to you and knowing that can sometimes be the thing that makes that person feel like they are not alone.

Sharing our stories is important because the numbers of people experiencing difficulties with their mental health is rapidly increasing, but people are still afraid to speak up.

Sharing my story in particular has empowered many young people who I have worked with as a youth worker, mentor, teacher and Head of Year, to get the help and support they need to reduce the impact that trauma has had on them and their families. Young people appreciate adults who can be transparent about their experiences, because if they can see that someone like me can live with mental health difficulties that impact me daily, then it gives them hope that there will be better days.

Not everyone can share their story as they are still processing it themselves and that is okay. Just know that you are not alone.



How and why is mental health stigma so prevalent in the South Asian community?

How? Simply because people remain unwilling to acknowledge and talk about it.

Why? Culturally that is how we have been brought up, to get over our problems. We don't talk to others because if other people think there are problems within our family then it brings shame to our family, our culture and our religions.

Parents, not just in the South Asian community, but in many ethnic minority communities have seen, and still do see mental health problems as a reflection of their parenting:

"If there is something wrong with my child then it must be my fault as I am responsible for them. If I don't acknowledge it, maybe it will go away."

What we are failing to see is that there is so much intergenerational racism prevalent within our community and that there are generations of parents and grandparents that have just tried to sweep their experiences under the carpet. This has increased the risk of trauma related conditions like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and personality disorders.

What we **MUST** do to minimise the effect that this has on generations of children to come is to acknowledge that our trauma, our pain, our emotional resilience, our anger, our inability to stay positive because of negative experiences, can and does impact our children. So I encourage people to talk about any traumatic experience they may have had and seek to understand it.

Having a mental health difficulty does **NOT** mean there is something wrong with you as a person, it is not something to point a finger of blame at.

Instead, it is something that the sooner we can acknowledge it, the easier it will be for us to get the right support. The more that people think like this, the less people will grow up to hold the negative stigma that is currently attached to mental health.

Mental health and my experience of the education system

I have worked in the education system for over 12 years now and unfortunately not all staff, regardless of training, are able to support young people in the way they need.

Poor mental health contributes to the majority, if not all current issues that impact young people. These issues are clearly defined in the '*Keeping Children Safe in Education*' framework, but when push comes to shove the main support that young people get in schools is from support staff, like mentors and Heads of Year. Teachers are under so much pressure to achieve progress that unfortunately on many occasions children who behave poorly in lessons are not always getting the support they need, but instead they are receiving sanctions for disrupting the class, or not completing work, yet when you look at the full picture, there are serious issues impacting the young person outside of school.

It is not just down to stigma when looking at the education system, I mean many of the staff members themselves are experiencing high levels of stress, which if left untreated over long periods, can lead to the development of anxiety and depression. The main issue in the education system is the lack of available, professionally trained mental health support. If I think back to a decade ago, the majority of schools that I worked in had at the very least a part time counsellor that would come into school. The past 3 schools I have worked in have not had that. This means as a school we are signposting young people to external services, which would be great. However, because their waiting lists are so long, young people are not being seen soon enough.

We must also consider the fact that as adults it can sometimes be hard to reach out to seek professional help, so just imagine how a young person must feel.

I must also touch on a lack of professional staff that are representative of the young people they work with and like it or not, this impacts whether young people feel they can disclose information to them.

There is also a culture of '*over safeguarding*' in some schools, in my opinion. Again thinking about representation, if a young Asian student disclosed they were sexually active, but had concerns, I have to take into consideration the best decision to make to protect that child, and if I think back to when I was in school, that would not be calling my parents.

Another example would be over-hearing a young person talking about illegal activity. Because of the lack of understanding of what would be best practice to keep that young person safe, I am aware of senior members of staff that are Designated Safeguarding Leads within a school, referring that young person to the police, instead of looking at the support that could be provided within the school environment. However, many schools believe they do not have the capacity to deal with things like this, but I honestly believe that ALL schools MUST start developing this capacity if we are to fully support our young people.

I want to make it clear that the above is not a reflection on every school and every teacher and every member of staff within the school system, as I know there are so many hard working, caring and passionate teachers that sacrifice a lot to help young people succeed. I just think, even if it is a few members of staff per school that are not truly educated on recognising the signs and supporting young people with their emotional health, in my opinion that is too many. Unfortunately given the decrease in funding for youth services, schools are the prime location for young vulnerable children to get the help they need.

*Fear, shame, anger, trauma,
From an early age I've had nothing but drama.
Crying, laughing, screaming, self-harming,
These behaviours should have served as a warning.
That I was in pain.
That I was in need.
That I was so hurt.
That I needed to grieve.
That I was fed up.
That life wasn't fair.
That I was a child.
I needed someone to be there.*

*Stronger, tougher, wiser, older,
My experiences, they made me a soldier.*

- Nadia

Dear younger self

*Dear younger self,
How I wish I could be the shoulder you needed to cry on,
The mother you needed to rely on,
The guidance you needed to move you on...
To brighter days.*

*Dear younger self,
I know that life has made you feel beaten,
I understand that you feel defeated,
Your energy and sweet spirit depleted,
It's such a shame.*

*Dear younger self,
It's not fair the struggles that life has dealt you,
I know too often you felt too
drained to find some to help you,
to see the light.*

*Dear younger self,
I know life thought it could break you,
but your strength is amazing,
It made you.
The woman I am, so I thank you,
For not giving up the fight.*

- Nadia



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