

IT STARTS WITH THE FAMILY:

Destigmatizing Mental Health for South Asian Children



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If you suspected that you were struggling with anxiety and told your parents that you wanted to see a therapist, how would your family react? In the United States as of 2019, only 41% of the people who had a mental disorder in the past year received professional health care or other services according to the Mental Health First Aid. This number is less than half the population of the United States, showcasing how stigmatized mental health and its care is in this country alone.

Zooming out and looking at this from a more holistic perspective, it is estimated by Our World in Data that about one billion people have a mental health disorder. That is a seventh of the population of the world. Within this one billion estimate, only a small minority actually receive therapy and resources for these disorders. There are many factors that play a role in determining if someone will seek out help or not; one of these is the stigmatization of mental health in non-Western countries and, more specifically, South Asian nations.

In a survey I conducted among the Saint Louis University student population, 53% of those surveyed stated that their families were not very supportive of mental health. Furthermore, one third of the responses stated their family would not allow them to go to therapy. These students were all of Asian or Hispanic descent. However, when asked if students would consider speaking out about mental health to their families, such as arguing with them or educating, over 93% stated they would, showing the lack of stigmatization that follows this generation.

One would think that since mental health is widely discussed in Western countries, that families that live here or have moved here would be more willing to listen and accept the phenomenon of mental health care. However, this was not the case in my survey as about 95% of the respondents' families have been in the United States for over 20 years. These statistics show us that while real-life experiences might be different, the traditional mindsets of South Asia individuals is difficult to overcome.

One other aspect that should be looked into is the responses of family members when they learn that their children might have a mental health disorder. Some

students stated that their family “would be quick to deny that they do” while others stated “they would make fun of me or not believe me.” Many other students stated that their families would be shocked or confused. In many South Asian households, having a mental disorder means something terrible has happened in your life. Many parents do not understand that these psychological issues do not have to stem from a particular event, but can be caused by other factors as well.

However, we also must look at this from the perspective of those who were raised in these South Asian countries before emigrating to the West. Their lives were almost completely different before moving to western countries that are more open to mental health care, have more resources and are generally more accepting of such issues. All of our struggles stem from not being able to seek resources but, for South Asian children raised in the West, we at least have our friends and other distractions to help cope. What could those who immigrate at a later age do, besides suppress any despondent feelings and carry on with their lives?

We are presented with difficulties every single day and, amidst the current pandemic, social situations are limited and isolation is expected. Without proper resources or help, it becomes a downward spiral of self-blame, lack of self-confidence, self-esteem and overall mental instability. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, mental health disorders have risen over 35% in the last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic alone, and South Asian children are a major portion of this rise—no matter when or if they immigrated.

But remember, you are not alone. As one person stated in their survey response, “Even when people don’t believe that you have a problem it doesn’t mean you don’t really have one. No matter who doubts you, always make sure to look out for your own benefit.”

Struggles from mental health do not just come from trauma, they come from homework, social circles, lack of sleep, job searches: anything in your life. More acceptance from families regarding mental health care can save and support South Asian children living in the West.

