This month’s blog for [World Mental Health Day](https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-mental-health-day/world-mental-health-day-2020), Saturday 10th October, focuses on mental health in BAME Communities.

**If you want to fly give up everything that weighs you down**

**By Mandhir Gill, Quality and Standards Manager**

Today we are standing amidst a virus pandemic, fear of losing loved ones, isolation and a broken economy. The remote world has blurred the line between professional and personal selves. This is taking a huge toll on our mental health, and evidence suggests that existing inequalities mean BAME groups are disproportionately affected.

MIND [revealed](https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/news/existing-inequalities-have-made-mental-health-of-bame-groups-worse-during-pandemic-says-mind/) that inequalities in housing, employment, finances and other issues “have had a greater impact on the mental health of people from different Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) groups than white people during the coronavirus pandemic”.

**Stigma and BAME communities**

[According to Mind](https://www.bipolaruk.org/news/1-in-4-people-from-bame-communities-dont-talk-about-their-mental-health), one in four BAME people with mental health issues will keep it to themselves, and half of the people of a BAME background don’t speak about mental health as they don’t want to place a burden on others.

Different communities perceive and understand mental health differently. In some, mental health problems are rarely spoken about and can be seen as a taboo leading to huge stigma and embarrassment for individuals. Unfortunately, this stigma puts further pressure on existing problems; this can mean people resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as self-harm, or drug, alcohol or substance misuse. They could also remain in situations where they are subjected to emotional and physical abuse for even longer before seeking support. It becomes incredibly challenging to have the confidence to access any help, which makes it even more challenging to build healthier ways of coping. Heightened emotions, cultural attitudes, language barriers, male stereotyping and the fear of stigma all play a significant part in avoiding access to services.

It is also worth mentioning that BAME is a term that includes a broad range of people with a very diverse range of needs. Different ethnic groups have diverse experiences in a society that reflect their culture and context; thus, they are intersectional and not a homogenous group. These diverse experiences, and cultural and religious beliefs, create particular challenges when people are addressing their mental health. Any support or therapy will have to be targeted and bespoke, being mindful of the multitude of underlying factors. BAME people need mental health professionals to be sensitive to different cultural attitudes and experiences, but when the wider culture lacks understanding of these differences, it can be even more challenging to find professional support from people who can understand and empathise.

**Pandemic and mental health**

Last time the world witnessed a pandemic of such scale was in 1918; therefore, the experience to face, tackle and live with has not been passed on from the last generation. We were never taught the art to live in a pandemic situation. The biggest question is, how do we self-teach and build our ability to co-exist with this virus for the coming months or maybe longer.

I admit that I was disturbed by the news that the impact of COVID-19 was disproportionately higher in terms of mortality and morbidity among BAME communities. For quite some time I was conscientiously following the numbers rising on *Worldometer* and would eagerly wait for the 5 pm government briefings until one day my seven-year commented: *“Dad why are you super obsessed with coronavirus, You don’t play with me anymore”*. This was a wake-up call for me. The realisation dawned that I cannot let this pandemic influence my mental health and well-being of my family.

[Karen Hartley](https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-dec-27-mn-2571-story.html)’s story came as an inspiration to me, who preferred to dance for 18 hours to live than dying when she got stranded in the snow. I decided to make some lifestyle changes to reclaim my strength and sanity. Limiting time on mainstream media, engaging in some form of daily exercise, practising meditation and maintaining regular contact with family and friends both at home and abroad. Most of all, expressing gratitude for everything were some of my lockdown resolutions that made a positive impact.

**How can you help**

Breaking down stigma is not an easy task, but there are a few things I think everyone can do to help:

* Recognise that you can't fully understand someone else’s lived experiences, and that’s ok.
* Encourage a culture of openness, and ask questions sensitively.
* Understand that talking about both mental health and BAME issues can be difficult for everyone in the discussion.
* Be a role model and help normalise talking about mental health. Especially if you do come from a community where this is less accepted.
* Above all listen in a non-judgemental way. The voices of the marginalised are often inaudible. Strengthen those voices, listen to their needs, and make sure to spread those messages.

A lot is going on in the world. We’re all facing a global pandemic which disproportionately targets ethnic minorities, not only because of susceptibility to disease but because of socioeconomic factors. The Black Lives Matter movement has hit a flashpoint and is demanding extensive changes across borders and continents.

I sincerely hope that accessing support will become easier in the future as there is greater emphasis and openness about mental health in the media.

References: mind.org.uk

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-dec-27-mn-2571-story.html>

mhfaengland.org

Further support:

* [St Mary’s Black History Month events](https://www.stmaryssu.co.uk/bhm2020)
* [St Mary’s Student Wellbeing Service](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/student-services/wellbeing/about.aspx)
* [Togetherall](https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/student-services/wellbeing/togetherall.aspx)
* [The Black, African, and Asian Therapy Network](https://www.baatn.org.uk/)