

# Family matters

## Attitudes towards mental health problems in the South Asian community in Harrow, North West London

Key findings from the report are:

### Shame, or sharam, fear and secrecy surround mental illness

Mental illness is a taboo subject, meaning there is little open discussion about mental health problems. People with mental health problems agreed that their diagnoses were something to be kept private and not openly discussed, even with immediate family – one participant said they had kept their illness secret from their spouse for more than 20 years.

“The close family try to keep it within closed doors; they don’t really want the wider community to know about it. I think they feel it’s something to be ashamed of.”

### The causes of mental health problems are often misunderstood

The culture of secrecy that surrounds mental illness can, in part, be attributed to misunderstandings and misconceptions that have grown up around all aspects of mental health problems over many years.

### The family can be both caring and isolating

Family relationships have a strong and integral role in the life of someone with a mental health problem. Yet in seeking to protect relatives with mental health problems from gossip and stigma – and also to protect the wider family’s reputation – there is a tendency for the close family to reduce the amount of contact the person might have with the extended family or wider community.

### Social pressure to conform

Adherence to social norms is the key to achieving and maintaining respect and standing within the community. These include doing well academically, being married, having children and being employed. Living outside of these norms, whether through poor academic achievements or having a mental health problem, can be considered abnormal and damage the reputation and standing of the person with a mental health problem and those associated with them, reinforcing feelings of shame and the need for secrecy.

“To associate with someone with mental health problems might be an issue for the rest of the community. It wouldn’t actually look good.”

### People with mental health problems are not valued

People with mental health problems and carers reported that people within the South Asian community commonly consider mental health problems as synonymous with being ‘stupid’. Therefore, others within the community do not listen to them or value their point of view as they would someone with a higher social standing.

“If someone knows [about my illness], thinks I have an issue, I’ve noticed they say hello, but just walk away, they don’t look at my face – they go and talk to other friends and leave me out of it.”

### Marriage prospects can be damaged

Mental health problems can be a serious threat to marriage prospects in families where arranged marriages are common, either for the person experiencing mental health problems or for relatives who become “tarnished” by association.

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