

Asian Mental Health – part 2

Sources of stress

For Asians living in the UK, there are growing stresses and strains which are leading to mental health problems. Previous articles I have written discuss the prevalence of such mental health problems. In this article, I would like to share some thoughts about the sources of stress and strain.

Migration

The process of migration has often been associated with emotional difficulties. Arguments have been made to suggest that migration is an inherently stressful process - the so called 'stress hypothesis'- or that individuals who move to settle in another part of the world do so because they are somehow unstable - the 'selection hypothesis'. The former argument seems to hold greater face validity. Whilst immigrants may be moving away from communities who cannot support them, it is more likely that positive selection is at work. After all, migration is a major upheaval requiring a certain ambition and inner resolve.

On arrival in their host countries, immigrants may suffer financial restraints, and stresses which accompany the adjustment to a new language and culture. This may be described as a culture shock, with associated difficulties in terms of social isolation, where immigrants have often moved away from known social networks. The racialised patterning of welfare state provision for immigrants is another factor. Colonial migrant labour was facilitated in the post war era, and these minority groups were concentrated spatially and socially in a manner which affected access to resources such as housing and education.

Conflicts of value systems

Whilst it is helpful to reflect on the difficulties inherent in migration, it is important to note that the majority of Asian Indians living in the UK have been resident for at least two decades if not longer. Whilst some of the early difficulties in resettlement may have had their impact, there are a second wave of problems in the social and family sphere. Second and third generation children who have been born and raised within a different world to their parents are frequently deviating from traditional norms. Kinship is seen to be integral to social organisation, and such violation of

social rules is felt to reflect badly on whole families and groups. A rejection of traditional values may be seen, by extension, as a rejection of parents themselves. Traditional Asian Indian values encompass generational interdependence, conformity, obligation and shame. There is a conflict here with more Western ideals of individualism, independence and self-sufficiency. These issues are highlighted in a 1991 survey of 200 Asians randomly selected from 1000 names on the electoral register in Haringey (UK) - over a third of respondents had concerns related to the upbringing, education and values being imbibed by their children (**Beliappa, 1991**).

Anecdotally, Asian parents have been known to talk about the fact that they moved to England for economic prosperity, and for better opportunities for themselves and their children. However, whilst financial stability and standards of living have risen, the parents feel they have lost more than they have gained. In other words, their children have undergone a cultural transformation which has driven a wedge between them and their parents. Whilst these parents speak of returning to their homelands to rekindle their old way of life, and reconnect with their heritage, they find that India and Pakistan have moved on. Their memories are so far removed from the current reality, that they would be strangers if they were ever to return. For some, this sense of loss leads to despair, and despair leads to depression. After all, having worked so hard all their lives to create stability and wealth, what is left for these first generation migrants when they retire? The need to plan for this difficult period in their lives is both an individual and state level responsibility. As further articles in this series will show, there are currently too many barriers between Asian's with mental health problems, and services who may be able to support them with their needs.