

Behind Closed Doors

*Healing The Emotional Struggles of
South Asians*



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*To the coolest dad, Rtn. Abu Mohsin,
Thank you for being my North Star and showing me how to
love imperfection.*

*To Anooshey and Faiz,
Thank you for being my inspiration to be better, work harder,
and love wholeheartedly.*

*To each and every one of you who shared your experience
with me, thank you for the honor of choosing me to talk to -
as family, as a friend, as your counselor, therapist, and coach.*

I am forever grateful

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Foreword

I want to take this moment to thank you for being curious, wanting to know more, and especially for wanting to learn more about relationships and emotional wellness as it relates to South Asian Culture and people associated with it.

So whether you are someone who is struggling with a relationship, with yourself or starting a new phase in life, my wish for you is to let you know you are not alone. Life is hard and sometimes we just don't have the luxury of choosing how it plays out; our only choice is to respond. Through reading this book, I am hoping you will find clarity when making those choices, and get exposed to terminology and resources to help you have a fulfilling journey moving forward.

This book is designed to help you slow down, and take a moment to sit with your feelings. It is important throughout this journey to be kind to yourself. To forgive yourself for mistakes you may be reflecting on. To grieve all the losses, to heal from the hurt, to forgive when it's so hard; not because the person who hurt you deserves it; but because you must choose to move on. Most importantly, this book is designed to help you to learn how to love abundantly and wholeheartedly; without

punishing those who are wanting to love you; because someone else hurt you in the past.

As men and women of South Asian heritage (commonly referred to being ‘Desi’) we sit with a lot of expectations and even more pride. We are raised to give up pieces of ourselves and what seems important to us, for the sake of our very important relationships. We pride ourselves in compromising and sacrificing, because the other choice feels selfish. My hope for you is that by reading this book, you will start believing that there is a middle ground, where both your desires and the values you were raised with, can co-exist. Make sure to identify a place where you can record your thoughts and feelings as you go through this book. A lot of my clients use their phones to do that... Looking forward to walking with you ...

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing

and right-doing there is a field.

I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass

the world is too full to talk about.”

— Rumi

DISCLAIMER: Please note that the situations and people described in this book are composites of my professional experience, to protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories with me. Also, the information I share about South Asians does not represent “hard and fast” dictates about the

Dr. Sheeza Mohsin

entire population. This is my perspective based on my learning, training and experience.

CHAPTER 1

South Asians And Their Relationships



*Ecstatic for a drop is annihilation into the sea, Pain untold of,
is remedy on its own.'*

— Ghalib

During the initial part of my training as a marriage and family therapist I studied different models of marriages and relationships, and how to improve them. But it didn't matter what the book said - my mind automatically thought in terms of South Asian (*desi*) families, "But what about his mom? What will the in-laws think about this? There is no way coming out would be smooth - it would be a disaster, with or without therapy."

The collective strength of the South Asian family is what draws people to it. The family ties and the celebrations - not to forget the delicious, warm, and savory food - as well as the community coming together are aspects that make this culture beloved and unique. You see this strength when a South Asian person is in the hospital. Family and friends fight over who will bring food to the family of the person who is ill. Hospital

waiting rooms have more relatives than healthcare staff. Nurses and physicians take ten seconds to hold their tongues and manage their judgment when they see the hospital room bursting with Indian-smelling food and chai served as if a party is being held.

You see the same affection when a loved one passes away. For weeks, people make the time to come and visit the family that has experienced loss. Temples and mosques host prayers and people are led in prayers for the departed. You see the power of such community during celebrations like Eid, Diwali, Vaisakhi, or Christmas. People come together at homes and places of worship, and you quickly feel that you are not alone, that you belong, and that you have identity and an inclusive community. It motivates young couples to conform to parental expectations and dress their children in ethnic clothes so that they can be loved on and shown off by the grandparents (who can't wait to flaunt their gorgeous, happily married children). Pictures are taken for social media so family and relatives living in their home countries can see the family.

South Asians are commonly considered a *model minority* - that is, a demographic group that is commonly felt in general to be more highly achieving than the overall population. Most of the immigrants in this group are legal, and moved elsewhere for a better life - in particular for the education of their children. They share a strong and anchoring loyalty to family values, which I will talk about in our next chapter. This “model

minority” label, held in common with East Asian immigrants requires hard work and deep commitment. Life is good when children go faithfully to Kumon, play chess and tennis, attend Sunday school of their preferred faith, and win spelling bees.

Kids continue in their perfection when they grow into teenagers who are diligent in the faith, have friends who are from the same cultural community, and participate in activities such as robotics, coding, debate, and athletics. It is even better if the boys are in cricket leagues (which are popping up in North America like Starbucks), and the girls learn classical dance or singing. Many of these families then celebrate when children graduate high school as valedictorian or salutatorian, or with admission to an Ivy League school, or a full ride to a well-known college or university. All of these accomplishments trigger dinner and social conversations full of speculation about the future mates they will choose and when the wedding planning can begin.

Life is great when children choose professions in medicine, law, accounting, finance or similar careers, yielding the family as a whole a higher social status. Everything is great when the children marry equally competent and beautiful partners, preferably from the same sub-culture, but definitely from the same faith. Everyone is ecstatic when there is chatter that the son or daughter could be interested in someone, especially if the requirements for a “good family” are met. (This translates into a requirement for a similar social status for girls, and a

higher social status for boys, as well as for a similar level of “conservativeness” on the religious and cultural spectrums.)

And then there is even more celebration when the children do finally decide that they are marrying. It gives the aunts and friends endless topics to talk about as a new family is welcomed into their lives. As in Western culture, weddings in South Asian communities are a capstone experience for the entire family, providing the ultimate expression of faith in the future triumphing over the difficulties of the present. Unfortunately, just as in other communities, South Asians can feel isolated when, at temple or *gurdwara*, cultural expectations to have this marvelously happy life feel a bit too overwhelming - perhaps even impossibly out of reach.

Multi-Generation Households

Whether the current generation lives with their South Asian family or not is irrelevant; parental beliefs, preferences, and the pressing need for their wishes to be honored make up a significant part of a typical South Asian household. In North America, it is not uncommon to find a South Asian family with a grandparent living in the house. While this adds a more complex dynamic to the family system, it also enriches family relationships, developing increased respect and love among members in many multi-generational families.

On the flipside, South Asian couples sometimes struggle with managing the balance and boundaries in

multigenerational relationships, depending on the overall emotional health of the family. The role of the mother-in-law plays a large part in the power dynamic of the household. In addition, how the grandfather thinks the children should be raised is considered vitally important, even if it is in conflict with the wishes of the parents, due to fear of being considered disrespectful. If the couple starts their marriage with the in-laws witnessing mistakes and observing conflict, then this added chaos can get in the way of strengthening the new relationship (especially if the parents are not respectful of the couple's boundaries in the first place). In severe cases, this disruptive role of the in-laws is known to be an extreme stressor in the dynamics of a couple's relationship. Issues can range from as small as how the kitchen should be managed, to as large as having a mother-in-law generating feelings of guilt if more attention, time, or money are spent on the wife. Interference in how the couple handles their parenting roles can put a strain on marital relationships as well.

Religion and Culture

The elements of religion and culture contribute to a special dance that each South Asian family expresses uniquely. In addition, the way that each family performs this dance takes precedence over all other ways of practice. This dance shows up frequently as a conflict over marriage and child-rearing decisions, among others. While more progressive families of South Asian heritage can show a great deal of grace and

acceptance to variations of this dance within the family system, many other families struggle with feelings of guilt and shame. These feelings center around concerns about abandoning their faith and culture as they grow in their new, bi-cultural identity. Needless to say, the husband's parents' wishes have privilege over the wife's parents in most cases. The exceptions to this rule usually only occur when the wife's family has a higher level of financial affluence or social standing.

For example, if the parents are moderate-to-conservative and the children are liberal, many couples develop a secret life, with certain parts of their relationship concealed. For a dating couple, this could mean that they will not share with their parents that they are sexually intimate. Or if a couple drinks socially, which is taboo behavior, it will not be shared with their parents. The same goes for the social preferences of these children before they marry. Dressing conservatively is expected from the girls, and so they will have more revealing wardrobes, concealed from their parents, which are reserved for their social lives.

Social media has not been helpful in keeping these secrets safe! So many times, the secret lives get revealed and parents or spouses find out one way or the other, that there is another side of life their child identifies with, which they were not aware of. At any given time in our lives, most of us are trying to live and be, without offending or hurting or even disrespecting another person or relationship that is important

to us. Social media has also altered the expectations in relationships to a large degree. Every so often I hear about hurt feelings because a loved one or friend did not ‘like’ a post or did not post something significantly deep on someone’s wall. For other apps that send ‘streaks’, the unopened ones communicate rejection and make the person sending it so vulnerable. Text messages feel strange if not answered while private stories and fake accounts can control who gets to see the ‘real’ person.

Another element of that struggle includes interaction with the family’s faith community. Going to places of worship and being eyed by the “aunties,” whose children have tattled on the liberal children and shown the “disgraceful” pictures of them on social media, can eventually become a source of isolation from the community. Additionally, choosing religious education for children becomes tricky if you live a liberal lifestyle. While many parents still feel that religious education is valuable, the fear of judgment within their faith community may keep them away from participating.

Family and Social Pressure

Due to the high level of interaction that South Asian families have with each other, this culture is not well-known for respecting personal boundaries. What relatives, family friends, or the larger community will think about a child’s actions plays a huge role in controlling decisions taken within

the family. For example, if a girl wants to marry outside of a community, even though the family has interacted with the boy and seems to find that he meets most of their criteria for a successful match, they may be inclined to say no. The family considers the domineering relative who would be against the marriage, or about how much shame was brought upon another person in their social group who did something similar - and so they wind up disagreeing with it completely.

Male Privilege

Even though male privilege is a global reality, it can present especially strongly in the South Asian community. Regardless of whether a boy is raised in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, or by people with that heritage across the Atlantic, male privilege is quickly realized by South Asian children growing up. It is obvious back home, where girls are not allowed to go to school and boys are. It is obvious in North America, when some girls are not allowed to participate in sports simply because of the clothing they are supposed to wear, or because it will entail trips away from home for tournaments.

Male privilege again shows up back home when the son's professional pursuit is financially supported, but the cultural value that the daughter is *paraai* (she will eventually "belong" to her husband and his family) gets in the way of financial support for her education. It shows up in North America when a daughter is told she must pursue college locally, but the son

can leave home to go live in the dorms. Much of this is done to protect the family's honor, in the form of the girl's virginity or reputation; if she is seen socializing with boys and men, she will lose value in the eyes of the community. The dance can become deadly if a daughter wants to marry outside her community or faith and it is completely forbidden. She may even be sacrificed in the form of an honor killing, or ousted from her home for choosing to dishonor her family in such a way. Elements of male privilege continue to seep into South Asian women's lives even as they pursue robust careers, make their own money, and begin to thrive. Many of them have to manage feelings of shame and guilt for wanting something for themselves, or about leaving their children for work or travel, or about having their husbands working inside the home to help out around the house.

Class, Socioeconomic Status, and Education

As in any culture or community, many of the challenges and privileges found in the South Asian community are anchored in socio-economic status (SES) and privilege. Financial class, education level, and social standing (both at home and in North America) influence the unsaid rules set by South Asian society that certain expectations will be followed.

For lower SES groups, the pressure to follow religious and cultural norms is even stronger than it is for those of a higher SES level. 'Gender bias' and 'male privilege' within family

systems also increase as education level goes down, regardless of financial status.

Marriage

Working primarily as a couple's therapist, I am most fascinated by the South Asian model of marriage, and what the common threads are that anchor the idea of "a good marriage" for my clients. There are some key elements that make up this model of marriage, and which may seem a bit different from the Western marriage model.

For one thing, I notice the extreme importance of the acceptance level (or resistance level) of the husband's parents and family toward girls entering the family. This includes the attitudes of key family members toward the newcomer: parents, sisters, older siblings, and even favorite children. Other key elements of the South Asian marriage model are the need to build trust and credibility with the in-laws early on in the marriage. People walking into the relationship are quite aware of this dynamic; barring folks outside the culture. In addition, boundaries set by the husband (or the lack of them) are absolutely vital when it comes to how much interference or influence his family will be allowed to have on the couple's relationship. You may wonder why I have not mentioned the actual marriage itself - this is deliberate for several reasons. First, all of these power dynamics (or "pain points") continue to play a role in the marriage over time, and can add to the

resentment or challenges within other relationships. Secondly the dynamic of the couple's relationship is influenced greatly by whether they live with in-laws and other family members or are living separately. Thirdly, conflicts within a couple can be magnified when living with family and or when family visits them. Finally, the expectation greatly falls on the wife to do justice to honor her husbands' family and to show her commitment to the family, while the same is not expected from the husband with regard to his in-laws.

The Stereotypical South Asian Marriage

There are five key elements of most stereotypical, desi marriage, in my view:

1. The man is the head of the household and manages the money, regardless of who generates the income.
2. Similar to most cultures, the woman is responsible for food and home management, as well being the primary responsible party for parenting. This is true regardless of whether or not she works outside the home.
3. The weight of making the relationship successful generally lies more on the wife's shoulder's as she is socialized to believe she must sacrifice her needs for the family.

4. The husband chooses how financial decisions are executed in the family, and in most cases, handles all financial matters.
5. Intimacy needs of the husband take precedence over intimacy needs of the wife.

Sexuality

The South Asian view of sexual expression is generally conservative, and sexual curiosity and/or exploration is a taboo topic with a strong stigma surrounding it. Sex is often considered something dirty or shameful, if talked about outside of wanting children. Sexual assertiveness is not encouraged in women. Women may land in my office crying profusely about feeling inadequate when their husband or partner is no longer sexually “chasing” them. The shame of having a higher sexual libido makes them feel isolated from their friends, who, in contrast, seem to be sick of constantly having to “put out” in their own relationships. Men struggle with their sexual expression as they experience erectile dysfunction or testosterone deficiency due to various medical and emotional challenges. They have even more limited options to seek help. The stigma around going to get counseling does not help the situation either.

In general, there seems to be a widely held view in South Asian culture that men have the privilege to express their own sexual curiosity, whether it involves trying anal sex or watching

pornography. These are not activities that a “regular” desi woman can explore on her own without meeting a significant amount of judgment.

Divorce - and what comes with it

Divorce rates among desi communities in North America may be higher than they are at home, but nevertheless divorce is still considered very unfavorably, and most South Asians do not prefer to exit a relationship. As a result, the “miserable marriage” rate for the South Asian community is; high. The stigma of divorce is still great, and it carries with it associations of failure, shame, and the impression of being somehow broken or damaged.

This situation has begun to change over the past decade, and it has been heartening to see that many South Asian families are able to experience divorce with strength and grace. Learning to evolve from the experience has resulted in the creation of more resilient children post-divorce. One huge reason for this change is the rise of better educated and more economically independent mothers, who are able to continue providing a stable and consistent life to their children no matter what their marital status may be.

Marriage outside the culture

We hear a strong loyalty to marrying within the culture, especially within the faith. In addition, while many parents are

now aware that their children are using dating apps in order to find someone special in their lives, there still may be a subtle, implied criticism that many people can hear when sharing that they met using an app. South Asian children also feel the shame of betrayal if they abandon their faith. There is shame in marrying the “other,” whether in terms of race, ethnicity, and religion.

People of South Asian descent who have chosen life partners from another culture can have various struggles interacting with their home culture. I have heard this from both clients and others, and I see that this is also; a unique dance of sorts. It’s as if choosing your life comes at the cost of feeling sidelined by your own culture and community. Multi-cultural couples can benefit from many elements of adjusting to life in their host culture, viewing their experiences as both enriching and fulfilling. Nevertheless, their own cultural connections to home may suffer significantly.

Some of the challenges experienced by partners of South Asians include language barriers, and consequently feeling excluded when socializing with family and community. The key challenge that many children face, especially in families with limited English skill, is a resulting isolation from parents, who don’t speak the other language. The parents can feel a sense of being betrayed by their children, when the grandchildren cannot speak the home language. This is especially true with regard to their sons, who appear to be

preferring a new culture and way of life over the way they were raised. Living with that guilt is hard for many sons and daughters. This guilt becomes isolating, as they cannot express the sense of loss they feel when they cannot share aspects of their culture with their spouse, or aspects of the culture that they miss.

I know reading the above may give you a feeling of heaviness, given that I have presented so many of the complicated elements of our community. Know that the goal is for you to realize you are not the only one and help is right around the corner, in another chapter. As your guide through this journey I want to emphasize the importance of understanding, so that you don't just treat your symptoms; you treat the root of the problem. Rest assured this is the ground work needed to prepare you for the healing that is to come. The steps identified in later chapters will help relieve so much of the conflict inside of yourself, so that you can pursue your happiness and joy. I have walked in your path, and failed before I "got it". I am confident you will get there too. The goals you set in your journey could redefine your life and how you live it, forever.