

# Minority Mental Health Month: Indian-American



As an Indian American born in the United States, I am fortunate to say my mental health has always been a top concern for my family. When my parents ask me how I am feeling, they don't just mean physically but rather mentally and emotionally. Even my grandparents, who were raised in traditional homes in India, are sensitive to mental health. What makes my family different from other Indian families? Some say mental illness doesn't exist, but in our family we have all seen living proof that it not only exists but manifests differently in everyone.

As sensitive as we are to the subject, there is still a huge stigma in my family. Hasan Minhaj's idea of log kya kahenge or "what will people think" prevented my family from discussing the details of Jyoti Agrawal's mysterious illness throughout her life. Jyoti was my aunt. She passed away this past Thanksgiving, after a difficult three-month battle with cancer. As we prepared for her memorial, discussions arose about whether to reveal she had suffered from bipolar disorder.

We debated telling our broader community of friends and family what Jyoti had suffered through while in college and in her adult life. Most people knew Jyoti as a kind-hearted, fun loving, spirited person but most did not understand the battle going on in her mind. She was successful by every definition, but a difficult road is what led to that beautiful success.

Jyoti's accomplishments are many. She graduated from University of Michigan's accelerated medical school program. However, it took her 10 years to finish due to absences

caused by bipolar disorder. She took a different path than others, but her destination was the same. She became a beloved psychiatrist who could relate to her patients as both a physician and a fellow patient, as she herself had been hospitalized fifteen times for bipolar disorder. Jyoti faced many uphill battles and was in and out of hospitals the entirety of her psychiatry career. She was the strongest person I knew because she overcame these challenges, without people knowing how much strength it took for her to keep going.

While bipolar disorder didn't define Jyoti, it did play an important part in her life.. As we discussed her memorial, I advocated for telling her full, unfiltered story. Other family members hesitated. Here we had a family that constantly put mental health first and yet we debated whether to talk about it. Stopping stigma means starting a conversation and making people aware that mental health disorders *do* exist. It is showing people that individuals can lead happy and healthy lives while living with something like bipolar disorder.

Ultimately, we chose to tell Jyoti's story and by doing so we hoped it would inspire others to start a conversation and reduce the stigma. It was not obvious that my aunt lived with a mental illness, but acknowledging her strength to get up everyday and carry on was important. It let others see that living with a mental illness is a strength, not a weakness.

NAMI New Jersey has a program called SAMHAJ New Jersey for South Asians that addresses mental illness in the community. I-AM SHAKTI is another organization that provides support for South Asians nationwide to share their stories. Both are a great way to start conversations about mental illness and they provide a sense of community, showing us that it is possible to lead a rich and beautiful life with mental illness, just as Jyoti did.

Elina Roychowdhury