

## **South Asian Mental Health Concerns in Canada due to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

April 24, 2023

Honourable Carla Qualtrough

5064 - 48th Avenue

Delta, BC

V4K 1V8

Dear Honourable Carla Qualtrough,

My name is Harleen Hundal and I am a constituent in your district at. I am writing this letter to you because I am concerned about the well-being of the South Asian population in Canada and the lack of attention given to the health of this population. The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted many communities and populations in Canada. One population in particular that has been shown to have had extremely negative outcomes as a result of the pandemic is the South Asian community in Canada (1, 2). This community is facing a number of challenges including financial burdens, unemployment, health concerns and comorbidities, and mental health issues (1). While all of these challenges are significant and important to address, I hope to draw your attention to the ongoing mental health issues the South Asian community is experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this letter, I will outline the problem with background information and also provide possible solutions that can be pursued. Your district has a large South Asian population, so I believe addressing these concerns would be directly beneficial to your constituents and demonstrate your connection to the community. I

hope this letter will open the opportunity for conversation and allow us to move forward in finding solutions for the South Asian population in Canada.

### **Background Information: Increased Mental Health Concerns Amongst South Asians**

South Asians are the largest visible minority group in Canada, members of the South Asian diaspora span several generations and have established themselves in this country with the hope of pursuing a better life (1). However, this community is facing a great challenge presently. South Asians faced extremely high rates of COVID-19 transmission and death rates. It was found the death rate in communities with a high population of South Asians is 25% greater when compared to communities with a smaller population (1). South Asians face vulnerabilities that make the population much more susceptible to contracting COVID-19. These vulnerabilities include high rates of unemployment (the second highest in the country behind Indigenous communities) and working essential jobs (health care, grocery stores, trucking, etc) where social distancing and staying home is virtually impossible (1).

These employment related vulnerabilities negatively impact people's mental health. People who are unemployed face a variety of psychological problems such as distress, anxiety, poor self-esteem, and depression. In general, the prevalence of such psychological problems amongst unemployed individuals is approximately two times the prevalence in employed individuals (34% vs 16% respectively) (3). Given the fact that there is a high percentage of South Asians who are unemployed (estimated to be over 17%), it can be deduced that several individuals who fit in this category are likely facing the aforementioned mental health issues due to their unemployment (1). COVID-19 created drastic consequences within the labour market, the pandemic led to an increase in unemployment rates across the country and people were less likely to work in the labour force (4). The combination of an already high unemployment rate

and further unemployment due to COVID-19 is negatively impacting the mental health of South Asians. It is essential that these psychological concerns are addressed and attention is given to this community to increase their employment rates. Additionally, South Asians who are essential workers face the risk of worsened mental health. Essential workers are people from a variety of industries such as healthcare, trucking, grocery, factories, and more. These individuals are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 due to the nature of their jobs, they cannot work remotely and are in contact with other people. Being at risk of exposure to infection increases stress and trauma (5). Essential workers with existing mental health concerns may see an increase in severeness of their condition. Additionally there will be new cases of people with psychological concerns such as post-traumatic stress disorder or anxiety (5). South Asians in Canada are overrepresented in essential work (1). This community's involvement in the previously mentioned industries increases the likelihood they will face poor mental health outcomes as a result of being an essential worker during the pandemic.

Furthermore, the South Asian community in general has been found to have higher rates of reported mental health concerns due to the pandemic when compared to other populations. South Asian individuals reported fair or poor mental health and worsened mental health since physical distancing was implemented at a greater rate than other visible minority groups (such as Chinese, Black, Filipino, Arab, etc) (2). It is likely that financial insecurity is contributing to these poor reports of mental health as South Asians reported that the pandemic had moderate or major impacts on their financial obligations more than other visible minority groups (2). These financial obligations include paying rent, purchasing groceries, and paying various bills. Financial insecurity has been proven to result in decreased mental well-being regardless of whether there is a pandemic or not. It also results in greater anxiety during the pandemic (2).

With the collection of this information, it is undeniable that the South Asian community in Canada is facing extreme hardships as a result of the pandemic. South Asians are facing mental health issues due to unemployment, essential work, and financial insecurity, and general stressors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This population of millions in Canada needs immediate attention with culturally-adept solutions to improve their mental health. However, creating solutions is not as easy as offering traditional therapy or publishing information about mental health in various South Asian languages. This community does not access mental health services as readily as other populations, therefore creativity and thoughtfulness will be required when developing solutions (6).

### **Mental Health Solutions for South Asians**

In order to create meaningful change within the South Asian community, a number of steps must be taken. Some components that I believe are essential to implementing an impactful solution include destigmatization campaigns to educate South Asians and culturally adapted cognitive behavioural therapy (CaCBT).

Cultural and religious beliefs of different South Asian populations can contribute to the stigmatization of mental health illness. Two types of stigma have been assessed, onset responsibility and courtesy stigma. Onset responsibility is when the blame of having a mental illness is placed on the individual with the disorder. An example of how this comes into play with religion is the idea of karma in Hinduism (7). This notion can bring forth ideas that the person who has the mental health issue is deserving of it because of poor actions or choices they have made in their life, thus placing the blame on the person with the illness. There are also other South Asian beliefs about supernatural causes leading to mental health illnesses. One example is demons (jin) possessing someone and giving them a mental illness (7). With this idea, the person

is stigmatized because they are thought to have a demon in them once again because of their own fault. With the knowledge of why mental health stigma exists in South Asian cultures, solutions can be tailored to provide education to this community and reduce stigma. Creating a campaign showcasing South Asians speaking about their mental health illnesses and the experiences they go through can help bring the issue into the light for South Asians. People will be able to see others who look like them openly speak about their disorders and how they have been able to receive help and improve their health. These campaigns can take place in a number of formats to be as accessible as possible to several people. Some formats may include commercials, social media posts, and flyers or paper products distributed in religious settings (such as Gurdwaras). By making information readily available, people in the South Asian community will gain opportunities to have conversations about mental health at home and in their various relationships to hopefully destigmatize the topic.

While reducing stigma is important, it is also crucial to provide treatments that are considerate of people's religions, cultures, and beliefs. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a popular and well-studied form of psychotherapy. The goal of CBT is to help individuals develop strategies to manage their mental health through examination of their ability to make sense of the events happening around them and the feelings those perceptions evoke (8). While CBT is a great solution on its own, adaptations can help make this form of therapy even more effective for South Asians. CaCBT is an adaptation that considers a person's culture and integrates that knowledge in the delivery of therapy. Mental health professionals are trained to understand diverse backgrounds and the implications those backgrounds can have on a person's mental health and experiences in general. This new form of CBT is proven to effectively treat depression and anxiety in South Asians (9). It was developed in coordination with the South

Asian community through researchers interacting with individuals who are diagnosed with mental health conditions, family members of the affected individuals, community leaders and more. This collaborative approach allowed researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how beliefs and experiences of South Asians integrate with mental health. CaCBT resulted in decreased symptoms of mental health illness and participants reported higher scores for their overall health (9). In order to effectively provide this treatment option throughout Canada, support is needed from members of the Canadian government such as yourself. This would include speaking on behalf of your constituents and inviting mental health leaders from the South Asian community to demonstrate to the government the importance of providing CaCBT for South Asians. Funding for individuals to receive this treatment is essential, it will allow more people to gain access to effective and proven therapy that can relieve mental health symptoms. In addition to providing funding for South Asians to access therapy, there must also be support from the government to train existing mental health workers in this form of therapy. Without therapists who are trained appropriately, South Asians will not have access to care that is tailored to their needs. This will prevent them from improving their health, leaving them in the same position they have always been or in an even worse state as treatment is delayed.

By taking this two-pronged approach of destigmatization and increased access to CaCBT, South Asians in Canada will acquire the support they need to manage their mental health concerns that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These solutions are essential first steps in the process of assisting this community that was deeply affected by the pandemic. More work and creative solutions will be necessary to further the impact of an initiative aimed at South Asian mental health improvement, but taking any meaningful action at this time will be beneficial to the community.

## **Conclusion**

The challenges that plagued the South Asian diaspora in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic have left a lasting, harmful effect on the mental health of this community. This community is already predisposed to mental health issues, but the added burden of being an essential worker or unemployed during the pandemic creates further vulnerabilities in their mental health. I implore you to consider the seriousness of these concerns and take action to support not only the South Asian population in your district, but across the country. Traditional solutions for mental health issues are not culturally considerate. Innovative remedies are needed to effectively support Canada's South Asian population. The South Asian diaspora has faced hardship throughout their history with Canada, and it is time to take considerable actions to showcase support and compassion for these individuals.

Thank you for taking the time to review this letter, I hope you found it informative. I ask that you stand for your community and the many South Asians living within North Delta by raising awareness about this issue and drawing attention to this problem. I can assure you that individuals like myself would appreciate your support and would be happy to engage in discussions with you and your team to explore possible options to address these concerns. Thank you again for your time and dedication to our community.

Sincerely,

**Harleen Hundal**

Delta, British Columbia

## References

1. Thobani TR, Butt ZA. The increasing vulnerability of South Asians in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International journal of environmental research and public health*. 2022 Feb 27;19(5):2786.
2. Statistics Canada. South Asians report lower levels of mental health than other visible minorities during the pandemic [Internet]. *The Daily*. Government of Canada; 2020 [cited 2023Apr21]. Available from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200902/dq200902b-eng.htm>
3. Paul KI, Moser K. Unemployment impairs mental health: Meta-analyses. *Journal of Vocational behavior*. 2009 Jun 1;74(3):264-82.
4. Beland LP, Brodeur A, Mikola D, Wright T. The short-term economic consequences of COVID-19: Occupation tasks and mental health in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Economics/Revue canadienne d'économique*. 2022 Feb;55:214-47.
5. Vigo D, Patten S, Pajer K, Krausz M, Taylor S, Rush B, Raviola G, Saxena S, Thornicroft G, Yatham LN. Mental health of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 2020 Oct;65(10):681-7.
6. Tiwari SK, Wang J. Ethnic differences in mental health service use among White, Chinese, South Asian and South East Asian populations living in Canada. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*. 2008 Nov;43:866-71.
7. Chaudhry T, Chen SH. Mental illness stigmas in South Asian Americans: A cross-cultural investigation. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*. 2019 Jun;10(2):154.
8. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy [Internet]. CAMH. CAMH; [cited 2023Apr21]. Available from: <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction->



index/cognitive-behavioural-

therapy#:~:text=CBT%20is%20a%20structured%2C%20time,reacti%20that%20caus  
e%20them%20difficulty

9. CAMH shares new evidence-based tools and training to support mental health of Canadians of South Asian origin [Internet]. CAMH. CAMH; [cited 2023Apr22]. Available from: <https://www.camh.ca/en/camh-news-and-stories/new-evidence-based-tools-and-training-to-support-mental-health-of-canadians-of-south-asian-origin>