

Program works to dispel stigma of mental health issues in South Asian community

By *JOSEPH SAPIA*
STAFF WRITER

SAMHAJ, understanding in Hindi, also is the name of an area mental health program, South Asian Mental Health Awareness in Jersey.

The idea of SAMHAJ, a program of the National Alliance of Mental Illness-New Jersey (NAMI NJ), is to create understanding in a world of misunderstanding — the world of mental illness. The target group is immigrants or descendents of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and other South Asian locales.

The mental health disease stigma is more so in the South Asian community, said Aruna Rao, 41, who founded SAMHAJ six years ago.

"South Asians," according to Rao, an Indian immigrant who lives in Edison, "have the whole myth of the model minority" — hard workers, overachievers, people who do not cause trouble.

So, if mental illness affects this group — 21 percent of South Asians in America are affected, the same percentage as with the overall population — it throws off the image, according to those involved with SAMHAJ.

"The more people get to know, the more I can delete the stigma and replace it with acceptance, education, resources, advocacy and hope," said Shrabanee Shah, 50, a Millstone Township resident whose 19-year-old son has mental health issues, including being bipolar.

Both Shah, also a native of India, and Rao run SAMHAJ support groups — Rao's in Middlesex County has dealt with 300 to 400 individuals over its six years, while Shah's in Monmouth County has had only two people attend a session since it began a year ago.

Is that all that could use help, those directly or indirectly affected?

No, said Shah. But "it takes time" for people to turn out, Shah said.

The support groups promise confidentiality, Shah said.

Rao started SAMHAJ, because mental illness has affected her paternal family, with members suffering from bipolar, depression and schizo-effective disorders.

"I've been drawn to causes," said Rao, NAMI NJ's director of educational services. "And I've seen how it affects families."

SAMHAJ, basically, serves the counties of Monmouth, Ocean, Burlington, Mercer, Somerset, Middlesex and Union. SAMHAJ, also, provides referrals for people outside the coverage area.

Fundraiser set Sunday

On Sunday, SAMHAJ is running its first fundraising event — "Disha, Journey of Hope," a music and dance fest at North Brunswick High School. Disha means direction in Hindi, Rao said.

Beside being a fundraising event, the idea is to spread awareness of the support available for mental health issues, according to SAMHAJ.

South Asians, according to Rao, are more likely to complain of physical maladies caused by the mental illness — perhaps heart palpitations or stomach disorders. But the underlying issue of mental illness may not be diagnosed, Rao said.

"When they do get served (for mental illness), it's a crisis breakdown," Rao said.

SAMHAJ provides a place for South Asians to be comfortable, culturally, according to those involved.

"You don't have to explain your culture when you come in," Rao said. "It's a comfort zone."

While now running a SAMHAJ support group, Shah started with SAMHAJ on the other side — attending a support group three years ago.

"I was so petrified, I was sweating, I walked in like a scared little mouse," Shah said. "It's the beginning of a new life. We become, in the support group, a close-knit family."

And Shah still attends support group meetings as one in need.

"That's my venting," Shah said.

"I think that's a fundamental message — You're not alone," Rao said.

"There's acceptance," Shah said.

Additional Facts

South Asian Mental Health Awareness in Jersey

"Disha, Journey of Hope," a music and dance fundraising event, is set for 4 to 7 p.m. at North Brunswick High School, Raider Road.

Information is available from Anu Singh at (732) 940-0991; Chandrakala Kamath at (609) 921-1419; Jaishree Ramnath at (609) 936-9168; Shrabanee Shah at (732) 533-7632; Madhu Sehgal at (732) 792-1673; or Padmaja Racharla at (609) 275-0243.

More information on SAMHAJ is available from Singh, its coordinator, by calling (732) 940-0991 or via e-mail at samhaj@naminj.org. The SAMHAJ Web address is <http://www.naminj.org/programs/samhaj/samhajnews.html>.