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Offering succor to the mentally ill, caregivers

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Asha's husband has battled mental illness for over six years.

In his manic depression (bipolar disorder), he gets aggressive, and blames her for everything that went wrong with him – even things that happened before their marriage.

In a fit of rage, he throws things out from the house and buys them afresh, spending between \$6,000 and \$10,000 a month. "A lot of my belongings end up in the trash," said Asha, who requested anonymity so her husband doesn't know she spoke with a newspaper. "In the night, I go through the trash looking for them."

It was at an institute providing behavioral healthcare where her husband attends group therapy that Asha learned of South Asian Mental Health Awareness in New Jersey, which supports, serves and educates South Asians. The couple attended SAMHAJ's self-help groups that include both people in various stages of mental illness and those who look after them.

"I was losing confidence in myself," Asha says. She has always looked after the family finances – filed taxes and tackled the paperwork. Her husband, however, told his acquaintances she stole all his money, and they came and lectured to her. She cannot take him with her to anyone's house, and when they visit their children (and their families), everyone feels awkward around him.

"I wanted to run away from home – and hide in a corner

where nobody knows me," Asha says.

At the SAMHAJ meeting, she discovered that there are others in the same situation. "After hearing about other people and their problems, you start feeling that you are not alone," she says.

Asha also attends the Family-to-Family program run by the National Alliance on Mental Illness – a 12-week course for caregivers, from which 115,000 family members have graduated so far. It was here that she saw young people, yet to go to college, struggling with mental illness, and their families learning to cope.

SAMHAJ is NAMI's multicultural support and education program, established five years ago to reach out to New Jersey's South Asian population. It has helped about 300 people through its support groups and also reached out to thousands more through its workshops on mental illness in hospitals, senior centers and at events like the Indo-American Fair in West Windsor, New Jersey, that 25,000 people attended in September 2006.

The SAMHAJ support group meets once a month for two hours, drawing between 10 and 12 people.

Anu Singh, who coordinates SAMHAJ's programs and who has a background in clinical psychology, says its members are typically in the first two stages of emotional response. They are either in shock (having found out that a loved one has mental illness) or in denial, constantly wanting comfort or seeking resources to deal with the problem. The second stage may bring anger and resentment about what happened ("sometimes, they express it toward God, or society," Singh says). They may express the need to vent

their feelings or seek skills to help themselves or their loved ones. They may also grieve for what a family member was before mental illness, or let go and accept the new person, Singh says.

She says SAMHAJ has a comprehensive resource directory for referrals. For example, it can help someone who is looking for a psychiatrist who speaks South Asian languages. (In addition to English, Singh speaks Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi.) For those who need support, it can also provide a referral to Intensive Family Support Services – a free program under which clinical social workers make home visits.

One of the main messages SAMHAJ wants to send is that mental illness is caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. "It is a biological illness, just like diabetes," Singh says. It is not caused by someone putting an evil eye, someone not being strong enough, religious enough, or having done something wrong in his or her past life. "One of the biggest things we want to break down is the stigma attached to mental illness."

Asha says one of her husband's parents suffered from mental illness since an early age. "I never saw that parent smile or laugh," she says. Her husband, whose siblings have bipolar disorder, was a normal person until an incident triggered deep depression. He emerged from it after 18 months and developed bipolar disorder.

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**[http://www.naminj.org/
programs/samhaj/samhaj.html](http://www.naminj.org/programs/samhaj/samhaj.html)**