

Focus on Practice

Name of Organisation: Asian Family Counselling Service

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Aims and Objectives:

1. To safeguard and protect the good health, both mental and physical, of adults and children of Asian origin resident in the UK and to prevent the hardship and distress caused by the breakdown of marriage.
2. To enable Asian couples and families experiencing difficulties within their relationships to seek caring and confidential counselling in their own language with an understanding of their cultural background
3. To advance education among persons of Asian origin about all aspects of marriage and family relationships with a view to developing personal responsibilities and enriching family life.
4. To educate both public, statutory and government agencies as to the difficulties and needs of the Asian population.

Target beneficiaries:

South Asian community above the age of 16, resident in the UK.

How is support delivered and by whom

The Asian Family Counselling Service (AFCS) is a national charity which has been providing low-cost, confidential, and culturally sensitive mental health and relationship counselling services in five languages to South Asian communities in Britain since 1983 through trained counsellors. The counselling takes the form of one-to-one counselling, couple counselling and family counselling. This service is provided in the clients' own language as well as English. It provides a holistic service to its clients and deals with clients who have multiple and complex needs. All counselling and support is delivered in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner, considering the individual needs of the client, particularly in respect of safety and protection. The service is delivered in Urdu/Hindi/Punjabi/Gujarati.

The type of issues commonly dealt with by AFCS are: marital problems, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, suicidal feelings, domestic violence, abandoned spouses, arranged and forced marriages, emotional abuse, post-natal depression, self-harm, generation and cultural gap, mixed marriages, conciliation & mediation, adultery, premarital counselling, incest and sexual

abuse, financial problems, managing debts, bereavement, supervised and supported contact, refugees and asylum seekers, and personality clashes.

It faces an ever-increasing demand from British Asian individuals, couples and families who come to it seeking help for a wide variety of issues. They are reluctant to access mainstream counselling services either because of language or cultural barriers. Some of the older clients have never received a formal education and cannot read or write. Even among those who are conversational in English, it finds that many are far more comfortable talking about complex emotional issues and trauma in their native language. Then there are those who might be fluent in English but find it difficult to explain problems, which have a specific cultural context, to Western practitioners. Because our counsellors have lived experience of South Asian cultural norms and customs, there are fewer risks of issues being misunderstood or lost in translation. Thus, the counselling sessions are conducted more efficiently and sensitively.

AFCS continues to put emphasis on listening with empathy and without judgement and providing a safe space for clients, so they can take a step back from their situation and understand what their issues are and how those issues are affecting them as individuals, couples and (when relevant) as parents. It is flexible in its approach, for example, transitioning from individual to couple or family counselling, if required.

When clients first come to AFCS, it conducts an initial assessment of their needs and determine whether its service is the most appropriate for them. If not, they are signposted to other organisations that can better meet their needs. It takes a holistic approach towards its clients by providing counselling and support, as well as information in matters which may not be directly related to mental health but certainly impact the client's overall well-being and peace of mind. For e.g., it provides information about the NHS, support groups for drug and alcohol addiction, organisations which deal with financial advice, legal aid and immigration advice, agencies which can help improve English language skills and provide coaching for the process of searching, applying, and interviewing for jobs, to name a few.

The global recession and cost of living crisis has affected many families that access AFCS's services. This has caused the breakdown of relationships in such families as financial pressures have increased. As breadwinners lose their jobs marriages, that are already fragile show signs of cracking up. There is a lot of anxiety about what would happen in the future and how they would support their families. This also has had an impact of AFCS's ability to raise funds by charging for its services, as families under financial stress find it difficult to pay a fee for our service. Only 37% of our clients are in paid work – half of men and a third of women. The rest are dependent on benefits. Many of them face a lot of hardship especially with cuts in benefits. This makes it difficult for AFCS to be self-sustaining and it therefore requires government support as well as that of other charities.

Domestic violence remains a huge problem. AFCS remains committed to providing counselling to perpetrator as well as victim of domestic violence. In the past, many women put up with unhappy marriages, as they were told by their parents that they had no choice but to remain in the marriage.

Refugee families whose lives have been disrupted because of war and civil disturbance have also sought counselling. AFCS hears from families about how they may have had to leave an elderly parent or a child behind as they could not afford to pay for their passage to a safe country. These families are deeply traumatised and need help provided by our service. There is also a lot of distress in such families because the Home Office takes a long time to decide on whether these families can continue to live here or go back. The uncertainty leaves many families in a constant state of worry and AFCS provides counselling and support to such families.

AFCS works with and forms alliances with other voluntary organisations both at the national and local level. For the past three years, it has been part of a Consortium with Tavistock Relationships at the national level. At a local level, it is part of a consortium with Ealing Abbey Counselling Services, Metanoia, Bereft and works closely with Healthy Minds and Roshni in Birmingham.

AFCS has delivered projects such as the 'Nai Umeed', 'Naya Rasta' and 'Aastha' projects funded by the Department of Health in the 1990's. These projects looked at the issue of suicide amongst young Asian women as well as depression and anxiety amongst the community. Between 2001-2006, AFCS seconded a counsellor to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to enable them to set up their Forced Marriage Unit. AFCS has also run projects around domestic violence funded by the Cadbury's Trust in Birmingham and the 'Diya' project in London and more recently a project around debt and loneliness in Birmingham funded by the Harborne Parish Lands Charity.

Evaluation:

AFCS has been independently evaluated by the Department of Education in its Relationship Support Interventions Evaluation Research report January 2014 (Reference: DFE- RR315, ISBN: 978-1-78105-294-5).

Replication of services:

AFCS's services can be replicated quite easily – it is a question of having enough funding to open offices where the need is the greatest.

Future of AFCS:

The COVID 19 pandemic has disproportionately affected Asian communities. More than ever, AFCS needs to ensure it can continue to provide counselling at low or zero cost to those who need it the most. Therefore, securing additional funding to expand capacity and reduce the number of clients on our waiting list is a key priority for the next few years.

Case Studies:

1. D is a 29-year-old woman from India; she was referred to AFCS by Women's Aid. She had been physically and emotionally abused by her husband and his family. D was fearful about the prospect of being sent back to India as her family would be stigmatised by her failed marriage. Her marriage ended anyway when her husband's family abandoned her at an aunt's house. Through counselling, D was able to work on how to cope with the trauma and resultant panic attacks due to the abuse she had suffered. She was able to overcome her low self-esteem and gain confidence and let go of the notions of what it meant to be a 'good wife' that had been ingrained in her by her family and community. D grew more empowered and was able to overcome the guilt and shame she felt due to her failed marriage and was supported by AFCS to file a formal complaint against her abusive husband.
2. S & K had an arranged marriage 2 years ago and have been living with S's parents. K found it difficult to adjust in her new home as she came from a liberal home and her in-laws were very traditional. There were a lot of tensions between K and her in-laws, and it began to impact on her relationship with her husband. Couple counselling enabled the couple to resolve their issues and they decided to move out of the parents' home and set up a nuclear home. The relationship between the couple and S's parents improved after that.
3. R was a 17-year-old woman from Bangladesh who came to the UK on a spousal visa after her marriage to her 19-year-old husband. She was very badly treated by her husband and her in-laws and after she had a baby, was abandoned in Bangladesh. They did not allow her to take her son with her. AFCS was contacted by the British Embassy in Dacca, and she was allowed to travel to the UK to file for the custody of her son. AFCS provided her with both emotional and practical support as she had no recourse to public funds. She was helped to file her case in the family courts, and she eventually did win her son's custody. She was subsequently given indefinite leave to remain, is looking after her child and now works as a carer.