



Knowing Me, Knowing You Research Report

Perception and experiences of loneliness and isolation among older BAME people in Middlesbrough

The Knowing Me Knowing You project is a collaboration between Abu Bakr Mosque - Welfare and Community centre, Islamic Diversity Centre (IDC) and Ethnic Minorities Training and Education Project (EMTEP). It is directed at diverse ethnic communities these bodies regularly interact with. This being primarily Middle-Eastern, North African, African, Kurdish and South Asian groups. All three entities operate unique community outreach engagements. Abu Bakr Mosque provides effective community chaplaincy. IDC operates a number of in community programmes to BAME individuals and families encompassing detached, disenfranchised community members including homeless. EMTEP has in place an established outreach mentoring/befriending/support provision.

This research phase has been conducted over a four-month period.

The project has established an Agile Working Group (AWG) comprising 10 BME individuals. Five of the group are women. The AWG composition is reflective of the ethnic background of beneficiaries (e.g. South Asian, Middle Eastern and African).

The demographics of people who participated in conversations/interviews are as follows:

- 5 BAME Women (aged 47+)
- 5 BAME Males (aged 47+)
- 2 BAME Disabled people (aged 50+)
- 2 BAME Family Carers for disabled elderly people

People involved in the project were asked about their perceptions and experiences in the following area:

1. What is the nature or type of loneliness BAME individuals are enduring?
2. Why is it or what is it that has propelled BAME individuals into loneliness?
3. How have family, cultural, faith and social factors influenced or contributed to loneliness?
4. How are BAME individuals coping and what can be done to improve or make things better?
5. Their views and thoughts regards loneliness and the BAME community.

Learning

There is not one universal 'BAME community'. The country or region of origin of BAME people in Middlesbrough is often diverse. The South Asian community in Middlesbrough is predominantly Kashmiri. The project spoke to one woman who was from the Punjab region of Pakistan. She is effectively an outsider or on the fringes of Middlesbrough's BAME community because she is not Kashmiri. There are various divergent micro cultures, which have different impacts on loneliness and isolation.

Patriarchal Family Structures can be a barrier to seeking help for both men and women. The BAME family setup is centred around a patriarchal structure in which there are strong sentiments of every individual fulfilling their role, responsibilities, and being compliant. Close-knit patriarchal family structures can be asphyxiating, especially for women, and can lead to loneliness and isolation. This is underpinned by individual's feeling shame and guilt should they fall short of expectations. If an individual 'rebels', then they are ostracised, overlooked or afforded limited interaction with the family. This approach is actioned with great subtlety within family settings and the wider BAME community.

For some women, once they get married the community sees her as her husband's property. No one else had the right to interfere or say anything. In some cases, women are subject to arranged marriage. The project spoke to one woman in this situation. She stated that she often had to look outside of her marriage for emotional support, but that turning to the community was difficult because she feared that the community would gossip about her situation. In her view, women of her generation are suffering in silence.

“Many BAME Women especially Pakistani women watch the Indian drama channels. You know those absolutely corny ones. It’s not because they’re quality, but their simply an emotional release. The women who watch them empathise and can put themselves into those shoes, as they really do relate to the characters. It’s self-help and the happy ending gives them hope. I know this as I’ve done it myself.”

For men, it is important to live up to patriarchal cultural norms and expectations. Quite often elderly men are seen as the head of families. In reality, the elderly generation are seen as geriatric and overlooked. They may be moved into old people's homes or deemed a burden on the family in terms of its 'modern living'. Some older BAME people are disenfranchised within family units and feel isolated in their own homes. Their status and role within the community compensates as an alternative 'family'. Marginalisation can result in a lack of opportunities to interact/communicate with others, discuss personal matters, and seek advice and guidance.

There is presently an attitude of denial amongst some elderly members of the BAME community regarding this disenfranchisement and marginalisation. It would be perceived as a weakness to accept that an issue exists. Beneficial opportunities will be passed over as a way of asserting autonomy over the situation, affirming to themselves that, they still matter.

Women put the needs of others before their own. In BAME communities, women have multiple responsibilities and demands placed upon them, with very little in the way of support. Extended patriarchal family structures create an environment where being a 'mother', 'wife', 'daughter-in-law', etc. is prioritised over their own needs. Women are less likely to take part in activities, rather sacrifice their spare time for other family members. Consequently, BAME women are reluctant to verbalise their problems, hence, they suffer silently, increasing the risk mental health problems developing. This also results in BAME women being reluctant to discuss issues of loneliness and isolation.

Bereavement is a source of loneliness and isolation, especially for BAME women. One participant explained...

“One minute you’re a happy couple and family, the next you’re plunged into a dark abyss and are all alone physically, emotionally, psychologically as a great big aspect of your life and existence has been suddenly taken away and there’s nothing you can do. You’re totally helpless. There’s a void that no one can fill and you become a prisoner of your memories. although I have family around me, that being my sons, daughter in-laws and grandchildren, so physically I’m not alone, but they can’t compensate or make up for that companionship and emotional

bond I've lost. It is difficult and as the years have passed it's not got any easier".

Stigma and lack of understanding is a major problem. Cultural norms and expectations are very strong in some elements of the BAME community, particularly the elder generation. A hierarchical class based Klan structure fuels notions of elitism and segregation within the BAME community. 'Keeping up appearances' and safe guarding the 'family name' are therefore dominating ideas. This is one of the key reasons individuals experiencing difficulty feel unable to talk about it. The notion that 'one would rather die' than bring shame to the family persists among elders. 'Letting the family down' is not an option. This is less important for younger people.

Talking specifically about the South Asian community, one of the participants commented that *"there's no understanding of what mental health is"* and that *"a culture of shame and labelling among the South Asian community is a barrier to others like him accessing help"*. Stereotypes based on "strait jackets, drugs, and medication" prevail. Poor mental health is associated with weakness.

Within BAME circles, loneliness, isolation, and mental health problems, are attributed to other factors based on superstition, for example bad Karma resulting from a misdeed that someone in their family has committed, or it's Black magic, evil eye, possession, or the will of God.

BAME communities are changing and so are expectations about family life.

Extended families and strong social bonds are, in some cases, myths. A participant commented that her *"children have their own lives to lead...I don't want to get in the way...I don't want to burden them"*. Some families are neglecting the elderly who are living on their own.

There is a widening divide between older people and younger generations in the BAME community, with younger groups embracing change and adapting. Younger members, born and raised in the UK, have fused traditional cultural and social norms with British culture. Tossing aside many cultural traditions invariably constricts channels of engagement within the family structure between young and older people. The two essentially become disjointed. This further contributes to loneliness and isolation among BAME elders. *"Things may be changing for the younger generations slowly but for us in the elder category we're stuck in old ways and worry about how others perceive us"*.

Confidentiality is a problem within BAME communities. Some of the people the project spoke to assert that gossip and a lack of confidentiality within the community is a barrier to seeking help. One participant described a situation where a woman in her 60s with Dementia was receiving care from extended family members. Carers were gossiping and failing to provide an appropriate level of confidentiality. The family are conscious that while it's BAME individuals commissioned by the council to provide the care, gossip and background chatter is having a negative impact on the women receiving care and her family. The notion of confidentiality is non-existent in the BAME community.

The importance of Mosques and Religion in bringing people together. The local mosque is a key gathering place and focal point for men from the BAME community. For elderly men, the mosque is more than just a place of pray, it is a key venue where they can socialise with others of a similar age and background but also interact with other generations and groups. Therefore, it would be feasible to develop activities for elderly men around prayer time. This is already done elsewhere in the UK.

For women, 'women only' Islamic classes taking place in Mosques are an activity that it is very difficult for husbands and fathers to prevent women from attending. Women do not need to justify or explain where they were going. They simply state that it's 'a women's Islamic Class'. Activities addressing loneliness and isolation for some BAME women need to be acceptable to male heads of families who ultimately make a decision on whether a woman can participate. This is not the case across the board for all BAME women.

Training of Imams and other prominent figures form the BAME community in Mental Health Awareness is very important. Imams and others involved in social action can provide links and interact with mainstream services, developing bridges and pathways between organisations and the community. This will provide greater understanding on all fronts. Firstly, for the BAME community in terms of what services are available. Secondly, this will provide an opportunity for services to undertake dialogue regarding culturally appropriate service provision for the BAME community.

There is a lack of provision within the BAME community for older people.

There is nothing provisioned by our community, for our community, that specifically provides support for older people, especially women. There are few opportunities to get together to simply socialise. One participant asked the Rhetorical question "*what activities and provision is there for us BAME women? Nothing*". Other women think that what is needed is...

"Simple forms of social therapy where elderly women and younger ones can meet, chat, nurture bonds and have a sense of belonging, and are able to raise their problems and concerns and share experiences; in the process help each other".

It is hoped that attending such an activity would raise confidence levels and self-esteem.

It is also important not to present activities as tackling loneliness and isolation. This would put people off. The activities are simply an opportunity to get together, but behind the scenes will hopefully build confidence for those attending and trust in those delivering the activity's.

Common Measurement Framework (CMF) forms have also become problematic. To date, those we have spoken to were presented the Ageing Better questionnaire forms as optional. All were hesitant and decided not to complete the paperwork. They questioned the purpose of the forms as they look very official and people felt something wasn't quite right given they were required to provide personal details and had to sign the form. There was the additional concern that this may affect benefits or any assistance they or any financial assistance their families were entitled to.

Researchers also felt that participants did not want it known that they had discussed matters of loneliness and isolation. They were concerned that others would view their participation as 'washing their laundry in the open', thus letting their family and community down. Negative coverage of Muslims communities in light of world events and national incidents further deterred individuals from completing surveys.

Phase 2 activity

Phase two of the project will facilitate regular weekly activities, one session aimed at men and the other women.

Women's activity

This will take place on a weekend as the women we spoke to prefer weekends as they are all available and transport is easier at this time. The women indicated they would prefer an opportunity to get together and socialise. They will look to theme sessions with specific areas to talk about such as family concerns, elderliness and growing old in the BAME community, developing positive mental attitude, supporting health and well-being, matters of social responsibility and of positive social action. The sessions will include general socialising and additional activities such as cosmetics, clothing, poetry, games, and weather permitting possibly some outdoor excursion. This will be demand led with activities designed and led by the group. The focus of the group is to create a positive, safe, informal environment enabling individuals to come, partake and readily engage with minimal apprehension or hesitancy, in the process to get to know others form new friendships. The women will also be encouraged to plan an intergenerational group trip.

This approach will bring women together, build confidence, and be a starting point for discussions around ageing, loneliness, isolation, and mental health.

Men's activity

The men's activity will also take place on a weekend. The activity will be "Chill and Chat" oriented to allowing men to come engage with other male members from the community, relax, socialise and partake in activities and discussions. Refreshments will be provided, as will board games and internet access. Additionally, individuals from the community have expressed an interest in sharing stories around how life used to be and what it was like for them growing up. The aim of the group is to furnish a positive, safe, informal environment enabling individuals to come and readily engage with minimal apprehension. The men will also be encouraged to plan an intergenerational group trip.

As with the women's activity, this approach will bring men together, in a supportive environment, and be a starting point for discussions around ageing, loneliness, isolation, and mental health.

Mental Health Awareness

Additionally, the project will work with Middlesbrough and Stockton Mind to help develop a mental health awareness training session that is culturally sensitive and meets the needs of BAME groups. This session can then be delivered to Imams, volunteers and other key people involved in community action.