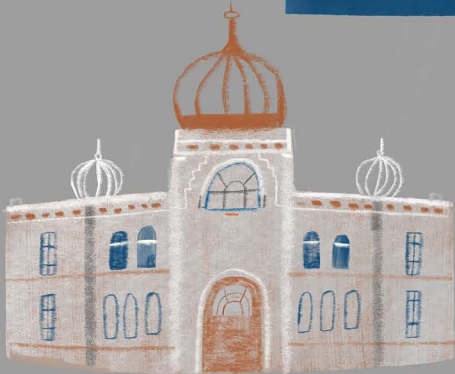
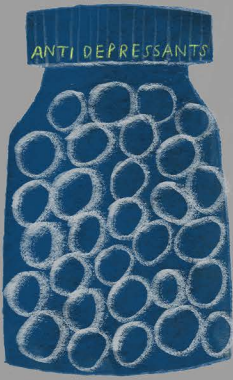


Alcohol, Izzat and me:

SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN IN RECOVERY



To the reader

This book is grounded in the lives of 18 women from South Asian communities in the UK.

The experiences presented in this book have been drawn from the fuller narratives of women who had the courage to speak out about their experiences of alcohol (and other drug) use. Their names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

We thank the women for their time and for trusting us with their words as we curated this book. It is because of their courage and resilience that we can shine a light on the judgement, the hardship and the stigma facing South Asian women with histories of problematic alcohol use.

These abridged and selected narratives reveal the trauma in their lives and their quest for help within their families, within their communities, and within a treatment system that often 'didn't look like them'.

This book is for all those who love, live with, support or care for South Asian women with problematic alcohol use. It seeks to inform and enlighten those who read it, to help people to understand and reflect, and to go forward with empathy and understanding.

Finally, it is for the women who are concerned about their alcohol use now, to give hope and to show you are not as isolated as you may often feel.

Content warning: Please be aware that the narratives presented in this book cover themes of sexual and domestic abuse, childhood abuse, suicide, and other topics that some readers may find triggering or upsetting. If you are affected by any of the themes presented in this book, please reach out to the services listed on page 42/43 of this book.

Themes in this book

Leena – Fitting in and alcohol as coping	5
Bina – Alcohol filling the void	7
Rano – Childhood trauma, depression and suicidal thoughts	9
Rosie – Self-blame, sexual abuse and feeling unworthy	11
Sita – Father’s controlling and drinking behaviour	13
Hema – Domestic abuse and alcohol	15
Raakhi – Alcohol, grief and bereavement	17
Ajit – Familial abuse, loss and trauma	19
Robina – Mental and physical ill health, trauma and alcohol	21
Biro – Parenting and child custody	23
Daljinder – Guilt, shame and stigma	25
Raj – Drinking at university to cope with fear and anxiety	27
Banto – Becoming a “proper alcoholic”	29
Suman – Realising the impact and needing help	31
Sukhi – Cultural isolation in services	33
Ravi – Turning point	35
Gita – Support through school and Asian support worker	37
Kuli – Support at work – “I wasn’t told to leave”	39
Moving into recovery	40

Artwork

The powerful illustrations that support these stories are originals from talented women artists connected to Manchester Metropolitan University, either as employees and/or as former graduates:

- Florence Burns
- Poppy Loughtman
- Penny Collier
- Maisy Summer
- Chloe Watts

Special thanks go to Eleanor Mulhearn for leading, coordinating and supporting the work of the illustrator team. For further information on the artwork please contact her on e.mulhearn@mmu.ac.uk

Design work by Neville Stott Design Associates Limited
www.nevillestottdesign.co.uk



Leena - Fitting in and alcohol as coping

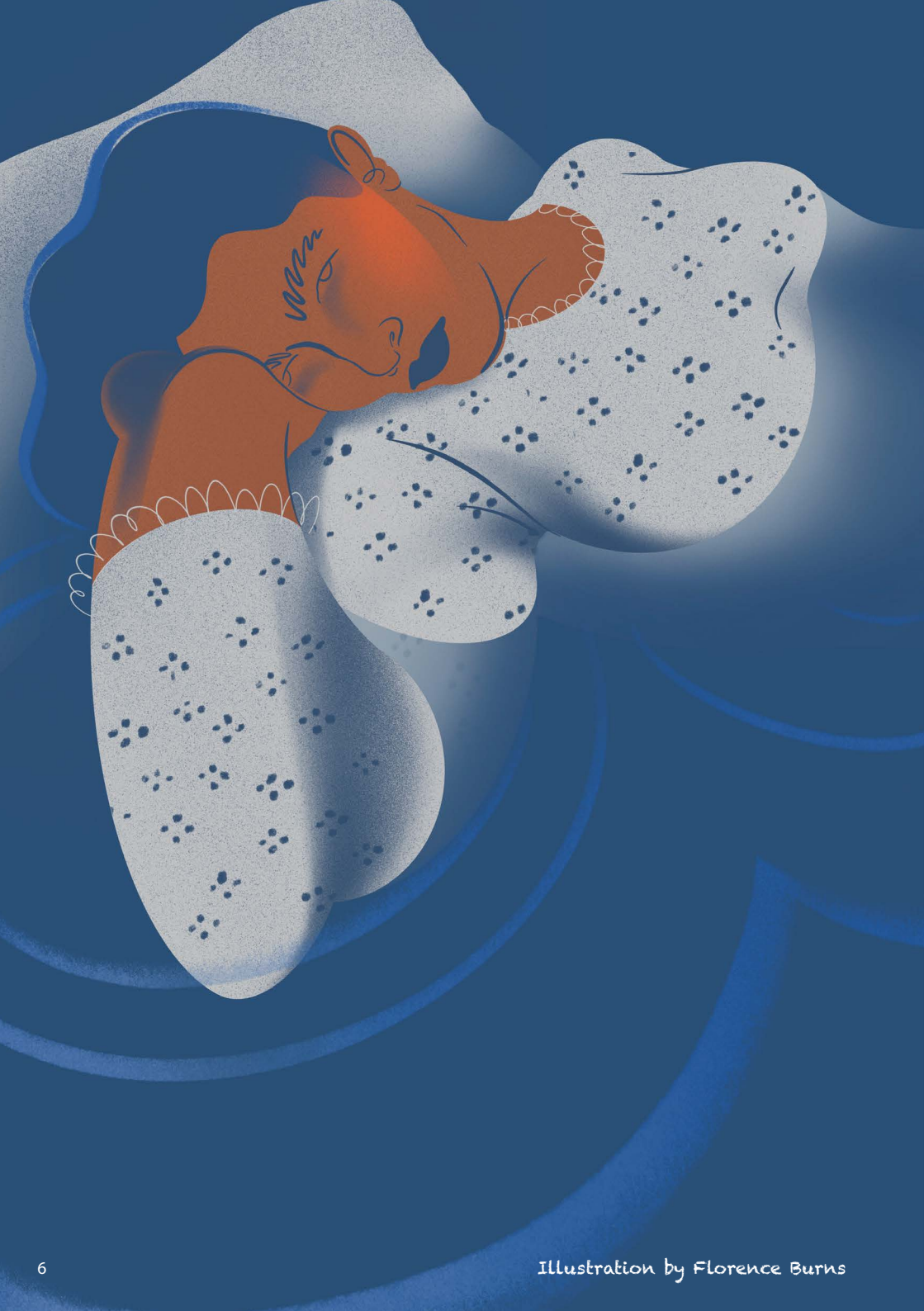
16 is when I first had my alcoholic drink...When I found alcohol, it was absolutely amazing...That feeling of being able to fit in, talk to boys, the courage it gives you, the confidence, the self-esteem...I really loved it... Looking back in hindsight, it was a problem because at 16 I became an early morning drinker only because I was on a time limit from college I had to drink then sober up in time to get home by 5.

As a group of Asians, we were quite suppressed, you know. I came from a family where I wasn't allowed to cut my hair, I wasn't allowed to paint my nails, I wasn't allowed to shave my legs, I wasn't allowed to have male friends. It's always about what the community thinks y'know...So, there is a lot of limitations on us, well there was then, growing up. So, you know, I suppose alcohol became that escape of the constant control at home.

At about eighteen I got myself a boyfriend who was Sikh, and my parents found out, we'd been together a couple of years... it's the ultimatum either you leave him or marry him ... So I got married at twenty one.... I left one kind of controlling household for another. He was almost possessive and obsessive with me... it was just a lot of control...I came back home for a little break... we were probably, you know, going to go through a divorce. I lost my husband [suddenly]...And I felt a lot of, guilt, a lot of what ifs...so I widowed, and then I just kind of hit the 'F it' button as they call it and I just partied hard.

Then I met my partner and he's mixed race. And he was just like me...we partied the same. Then I found out I was pregnant... I drank through my pregnancy, not heavily ... then I had my second child and the drink, again, was there side by side. I drank through that pregnancy, and you know, thank God that my kids came out fine... I wasn't drunk where I was lying on the sofa and not tending to my kids. You know, I was going to parents' evenings, I was going to assemblies, but you know alcohol was always there side by side.

In the December he (partner) came home and said oh you need to pack your bags, you're going to rehab. And they told me I was critical, given four months to live... so I stayed in rehab for six weeks... My family, even my uncles, that y'know are quite strict Sikhs with big beards and big turbans knew that there was something wrong. And they were all very supportive y'know... in the end for me to get help was for me to save my life. ... I'm a Sikh...And I think having a faith changed my life as well. Sikhi is quite spiritual...Because the two went hand in hand... At times I'm quite open about it now because I think if my story can help one other person... I do try and do a lot of work within recovery and alcoholics.



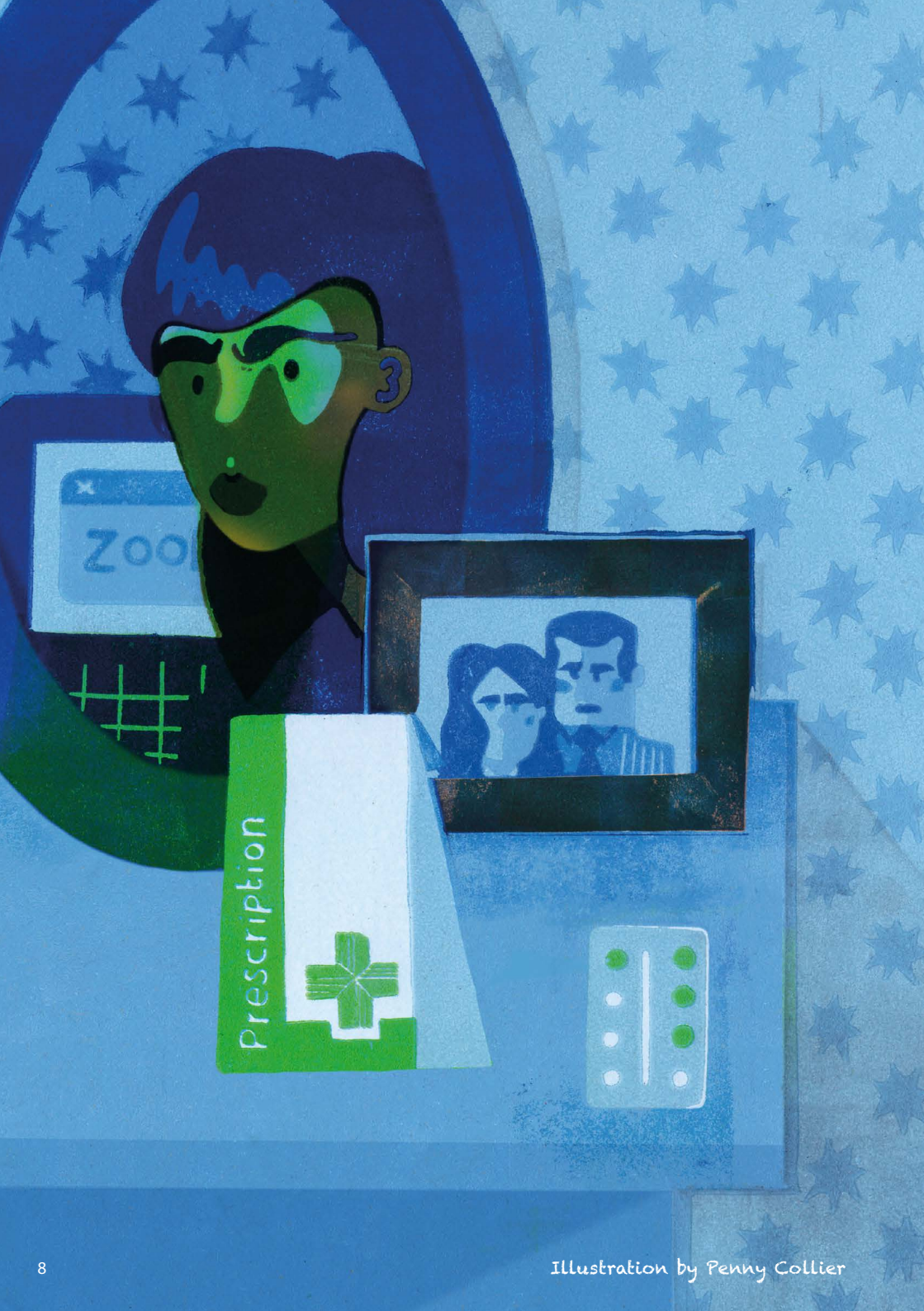
Bina - Alcohol filling the void

I became a single parent... So, my first, my marriage lasted one year. He was abusive and that's when my first daughter came in ... And then the second relationship I had, lasted 3 years, so that's my second daughter. And he was also abusive. The kids were little. That's what my focus was. You know, it was all day, every day. I'd leave, you know, take them to school, bring them back, go shopping, work. That was it, at that point. I think it got to about, when they was about, I'd say about – the eldest one was probably about 10, that I started drinking socially. I didn't even have drink in my house at that point... I probably started experimenting when I was about 25/27, which is obviously much later than a lot of other people, but it wasn't problematic at the beginning, it was more experimental. It was very much social, and it was very much probably one day in the weekends, you know.

... so basically what I was doing is if I had a day off work, I would drink. So, it wouldn't just be the weekend. It would then be on that day, and then obviously be able to wake up and do my normal duties and be a mum... I didn't realise that it was, it was something else in the background. I thought it was pretty normal to be fair... alcohol use is very social. You know, you've got your day off. You gonna meet up your friends. You'll be in a pub all day. You know, and because there wasn't real, any real effect with regards to me continuing doing what other daily stuff. I didn't again, see that as a problem. I thought it was okay, y'know, pretty normal.

[it came to a head] when... my girls had grown into teenagers. Got to that sort of age... But I had like, it was like a loss. It was like I suppose it was grief again. I didn't know that at the time... when I said grief, for me the only reason I know it was grief was because I was lost. I felt lost because my girls didn't need me as much as they did before they became teenagers. So, for me it felt like I'd lost my identity. I'd lost my purpose. I didn't know anything apart from how to raise my children. To be, for them to be my, yeah, my, I dunno. Just my everything. They were my everything... I had a period of not being at work... so I was waiting around through an agency to get another job but nothing was coming up.

So, every day I was drinking to basically get through the day, to make me feel calmer. Or that's what I thought was happening. It was making me feel calmer. Letting the day go quickly, still being able to carry on with the cooking and cleaning and all of that. So, this went on for a while. So, my drinking increased. Where it did really start getting really bad like literally it's 24 hours a day. Near enough. I was drinking to sleep. I was drinking to just as I said, get over the day... in between the – not having a job and the girls not really being around me.



Rano - Childhood trauma, depression and suicidal thoughts

He (dad) was an, he was an alcoholic. ... Childhood was, yeah it was rocky. It was, it was, I think yeah there's a lot of childhood trauma... I think when I was younger, I was depressed as a child. I just didn't know what it was. I didn't know how to define it. You don't know what to call it. But I just, it was the way I felt was this feeling of sadness all the time. And so when I look, think back about it now, it's like always feeling sad. What was that? That was depression.

My parents weren't strict, but we weren't allowed to do a lot when we were younger. Whereas other kids were probably experimenting, we weren't allowed, we weren't allowed to go out. So, it (alcohol) started probably much later in life. So I'd say around like 18. ... I've got quite a small frame, so I couldn't handle, I couldn't handle alcohol. Every time I drank when I was a bit younger I would end up throwing up, every single time... But when I like got older, that's when the drinking became more regular.

So, I think the way we were brought up, had a massive impact on who we became as young adults and adults. And the decisions that we made because we didn't really have a lot of direction. And so, we were just relying on ourselves to grow up on our own. And find our independence in whichever way we knew how. ... I started my own business actually, but then Covid hit during that time I found it really difficult to, like motivation and I just felt depressed... And then lockdown came along and then I was just drinking like mad. But I think a lot of people were. But then that's when, that's when I first realised that maybe there's something wrong with me. You know, when I, I was going to the supermarket and buying like 5, 6, 7 bottles. Finishing it in a week and going back and getting more. And then most of the time I'd be drinking by myself in my room, like that.

Then I think it was during lockdown, I felt, I think it was the lowest I've ever felt in my entire life. I felt suicidal. I felt suicidal and that's when I thought, right you know... I'd had therapy not related to alcohol, but then it was specifically related to alcohol. Actually, I wasn't even looking for it. I was just looking for therapy for depression. I mentioned the drinking and they said 'ah well we can get you something that's specifically geared for that'. And I said 'Okay fine'...

And you know, in an ideal world I would love to have therapy forever... And, actually when I was seeing the alcohol counsellor, she, that's when I told you I was feeling my lowest and I was feeling suicidal, and I then decided to go on antidepressants. And I've been on anti-depressants for just over a year now. And it was a decision I made whilst talking to her. And yeah, and I'm still on them. I feel like, I'm too scared to come off them.



I
WANTED
TO
NUMB IT
ALL AND
THE ONE
SUBSTANCE
THAT I
KNEW DID
THAT WAS
ALCOHOL

Rosie - Self-blame, sexual abuse and feeling unworthy

I was sexually molested by a family member from the age of 5 to 8. Obviously, I didn't disclose it at that point. At first, you're not really, you know, you don't actually know it's wrong... And it wasn't until I was 13 years old, and we were doing a sex education class. And it was almost like the girls around me, you know is all giggly and squeamish as you do at that age. But they don't actually know what those particular organs or a penis or whatever looks like. But I did, I knew what it looked like you know. And I had done some of the sexual acts that you know they were, that they were educating us on at that time.

I just decided that night that I was gonna tell my mum. She was obviously in shock, but she believed me. ... My dad kind of sat there, like I told him I just gone to the shop to pick up a bag of sweets. So, I told him again, but I told him in vivid detail. I wanted a reaction, but I didn't get the reaction... My mum took me to the doctors. Social services got involved as they do. The police got involved as they do. But ... my mum's family were putting pressure on my mum to not allow me to take it to court. ... So, in the end I wasn't allowed to take it to court... You know, it was almost like I was not seen. I was told that it's happened now, and I need to move on... my parents still talked to him (abuser), and he was still very much accepted within the family.

So, I got to a point where I started to take responsibility for the abuse onto myself, you know. Okay everyone's still talking to him, and everyone is okay with him. But everyone is telling me to shut up and move on. So, I must be the one that's responsible for this. And when you take on that kind of responsibility for, for that, you know. It led me down the route of anorexia. It led me down the route of, you know, numerous suicide attempts. I just, you know, hated myself... And I guess my resentment started to build up more and more. Cause I couldn't understand or comprehend how my parents were still okay talking to this man...

But, so I met the father of my kids at 17 years old... and looking back now, had I not been already vulnerable, I would have probably dated him for a little while, spotted the fact that he had a lot of temper issues and left it. But the fact that he showed me emotion. He, he gave me what I craved from my family. ... And he, you know, he completely annihilated me. I was already broken...

And it got to point where ... I believe that I'm unworthy. I believe I'm not where I should be. I believe I'm unintelligent. I believe I'm not a good enough daughter, mother, partner. I believe that I deserved all the numerous times that he cheated on me. I believe all these things that I did, you know... And I wanted to numb it all. And the one substance that I knew did that was alcohol, you know.



Sita - Father's controlling and drinking behaviour

My father was a teacher. We grew up in the 70s – my dad came over from India, because he was the only boy, he was the main person who went to school. So, he came to the UK in the early 60s. ...

And because I grew up with three brothers, I was a tomboy. A tomboy, my sister was more girly girly, and I was a more of a boy playing with marbles and football and basketball. And I chose all my friends who was feisty. Who could dominate the world, to challenge your father's behaviour. Because boys were seen at that time, not now, at that time, more superior than the girls because they carry the family name. And I didn't like that growing up as a little girl. I thought my father shouldn't do that... But as you know, in those days, 70s and the 80s the dominant person was the male and the boys and I didn't like that at all. My sister was a bit more lovable and caring. ...

Because dad used to compare us with his friends' children, because they had to go to university, we was forced to study. And I didn't want to study. ... And my dad used to say to me, you're no daughter of a schoolteacher's... He was a functional alcoholic my dad was. To the world he looked beautiful because he was educated, and he helped his friends who weren't educated to get all their immigration sorted back in the 60s, 70s, and the 80s. And my sister got a bit you can call it abuse, verbal or mental or physical abuse from my dad because she didn't like his behaviour either. And my mom was pretty. And he didn't like that if other men looked at Mom 'It must have been your fault that other man thought you was good looking'... I'm just a bit emotional because you just remember what your childhood is. I think we all have experiences. ...

I drank a little bit, like snowballs, before I got married, with my sister, but not a lot. But after 20 when I got married, I was introduced to wine and martini. But I drank socially for 12 to 13 years. ... I think because I felt like a failure to my dad. I felt like a failure to everyone. And I was a people pleaser. People pleasers do have a sensitivity to drink, because they're not pleasing themselves, they're pleasing others. And I organised work social services parties just because I could have a drink. I drank alcoholically five years prior to that. Prior, three years was alcoholically and two years before that it was heavy and binge drinking. Which now, and before the last 10 years I consider it as alcoholism.

... my husband in the end had to throw me out the house, to get my life back. He just gave my friend the credit card. Because I hit him, in anger... when I relapsed and he couldn't take it. Because all the pain I caused him... I went one day to my Dad's house but I thought I'm not staying at my Dad's house to embarrass him. I'm going to stay at one of our friend's house for two weeks. And that's when my [recovery] journey began.



MY



WAY



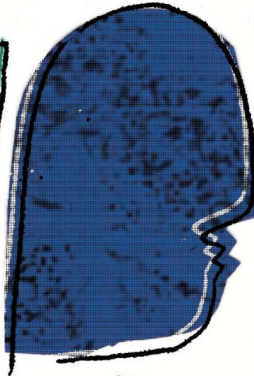
OF



DEALING



WITH



IT



WAS



TO



GO



OUT



AND



DRINK

Hema - Domestic abuse and alcohol

... I met my child's dad at eighteen... I got pregnant when I was nineteen... So, he was a different caste from me. Which was a big thing for my family... it's not just that. He was just from a family with a very bad reputation. So yeah, and I had to deal with, he was quite controlling so. Pretty much everyone (objected)... So, when I got with him, my family stopped speaking to me. And then I got pregnant. So, my family just stopped speaking to me. ...Yeah, he was just very domestically violent... So yeah like, people warned me about him, but I didn't really know. And then on his birthday, that was the first time he just flipped on me. I wasn't a big drinker then, so didn't really drink. Had a few drinks and yeah, we had an altercation, yeah we had an argument. And then I remember running. I was running so fast, with no shoes on and he dragged me by my hair and pulled me back and beat, beat me so bad. And I remember the police coming... they didn't do nothing.

(I was with him) about eight years... I didn't end anything. He ended it by beating me up really bad, that I almost died... I found out that he cheated on me and he did some really bad stuff. I questioned him about it, he admitted to it. And then we booked a holiday... and I kept saying to his dad that he's acting out of character. I was like, somethings not right with him...(On one of the days) he was drunk... He beat me so bad, so bad... my child watched everything... Half my hair was left on the floor. And that was the night that I picked the drink up. He got arrested. The police had enough evidence... What had happened is, the police should have pressed charges... They offered to take me to the hospital, but the dad was holding my hand saying 'No, don't do that. Say no comment. Don't go...'... They should have took me in another room. But they didn't... He did get arrested, but I didn't make a statement. So because I didn't make a statement, they couldn't get him on anything. So, they released him. But really, naturally they should have pressed charges with the evidence that they had in front of them.

... I moved house. ... Then it'd be like, then I was still letting him see (my child) because I was trying to be a good person. So, when I was letting him see them yeah, it was like he was so abusive to me. So, when he would take them away, I would be so upset. So, my way of dealing with it, was to go out and have a drink. So yeah.

It went on for quite a while, then I ended up in a refuge. Because I wasn't with him, and he like, there was an incident that happened. He was seeing (my child) and then when I was trying to get them out the car and he smashed my hands in his car door. So that then that's when I had to go to a refuge. And I feel like that refuge really turned my life around ... I mean they supported me in getting my home, but the rest was up to me.



Raakhi - Alcohol, grief and bereavement

My father drank a lot, socialising, he was party animal, but he would always be, you know the loudest, proudest person. Huge family man, huge happy drinker. And we would very regularly, my Dad always drove as well. And I realise later, that he probably very much drove whilst intoxicated. And, and yep, we had family life, which had two sort of upbringings. Our very Western upbringing with our friends and neighbours, and you know, people around us. And then our big cultural background also.

My father passed away when I was eleven. ... It happened very quickly. He was, he was quite young when he passed away. So, when he did pass away, he went to hospital. We had a huge party the night before for my birthday actually and my Dad was the last person standing... And my mum was saying 'Come on, you know, we need to finish you know. The kids will have school'. And he was saying no, no, no, no. So, we ultimately believed that he knew that something was happening. That he wasn't going to see everybody again.

And following that, the grief that my mum went through because it was such a shock, ... we never spoke about what had happened. It was kind of dealing with all of a sudden, just telling other people that he'd gone. ... So, we never spoke about it. And we never spoke about the sadness around it. And, we never spoke to mum because she was very vacant for months, months and months afterwards. So, me and my brother certainly come together. We were rarely apart. And we got each other through this time. ...

When I had my first drink, I was 26... It was almost like a relaxing, oh my gosh, life has just actually for the first time calmed down. And then it became my relaxing tool. And it would be weekends mainly. It would be bingeing, you know, over the weekends. And certainly, mummy life was very much 'everybody drinks', everybody goes for a drink, everybody has a drink. You have a bottomless brunch for your lunch, on your birthday. Even mum's nights, I really understood when I gave up drinking and I attended a mum's night at a school, at my son's school. ...

So I drank and drank and drank. Mainly over weekends... Never in the week. Never, cause I started working again. And never in the week, but always the weekends. It was like my - I wanna forget. And I think it was trauma associated. You know, instead of dealing with trauma, you just forget. And so, you just think, right I've been through whatever, but I'm not gonna think about it. D'you, know I think it probably stems from grief from my father, never dealing with that. You know, never once. You push all your feelings down. You push it down. You never talk about it. You never think about it. And you just go on. You keep calm and carry on, you know. It just, it's never spoken about.



Ajit - Familial abuse, loss and trauma

Mum's life was really interesting. And she was very much controlled by my Dad. She didn't speak any English. It's only probably in the last few years in recovery that I've felt compassion for my Mum. Because Mum, when I was a child, would say to me "You're too dark. You're too ugly. We, you know, nobody will want to marry you". So she would never let me play out in the sun – because I was already dark. Whereas my brother could. My brother was very much encouraged to go to college and university and so forth. But me, Dad said you're not going to need an education where you're going.

So, I was forced into a child marriage when I was 17 at the time, shipped from (place in England). And it was abuse from my ex-partner/husband, and also his family and the extended in-laws as well. So, I just felt like, everything, you know, "your cooking's not good enough, the salt isn't good enough in there, you're too dark, these yogurts nice ones are for my children, these Tesco own brand are yours". So, it was just constant. And I just felt always, I didn't feel good enough. I was trying to cope. I was trying to manage. I was working. ... Then, so at 18 I went to the GP, and the GP then prescribed me valium. And it fixed it. Absolutely fixed it on the inside. And I honestly felt like I was floating. And I managed up until the point I couldn't manage anymore. So I took the lot, the valium.

So, then I stayed in that marriage for eight and a half years. My parents wouldn't have me back, because they said shame 'izzat', "you have to go back". So I'd carry on going back. ... And then I fled at the age of 26. So I ran away. And as a result of me leaving, ... my family had nothing to do with me. They tried to find me. So, it's been over 26 years since I've seen them...

I ran away to (a place in England). So, I thought it's big enough, they won't find me. I didn't know about Refuge. And I found a job, found somewhere to live. And it was my manager at the time, he said, "we all go the pub on a Friday". Of course, in my family women didn't go to the pub, so, I've never been inside a pub. So, I went in a pub, and I had my first alcoholic drink, which was a bottle of Budweiser. I liked it. It numbed something. It was really lovely.

And then I met a man. It was very much a controlling relationship. He introduced me to wine-ing and dining. And he introduced me to cocaine. ... I ran away from him as well. And so, then I just thought, I'll just keep moving around the country so my family just don't track me down, because they had reported me missing to the police. They wanted to find me... I couldn't find a therapist who could understand that I was going through a grief process. I was grieving for the family that's still alive.

So, I was completely lost. ...



Robina - Mental and physical ill health, trauma and alcohol

I got diagnosed with bipolar [disorder]. And I think my bipolar really got triggered. And then I went to alcohol, as a result of trying to cope basically. But obviously it didn't help because it made my, it made my situation ten times worse. Things really got bad ... I was attacked by this guy who I was dating on and off, but he became a bit obsessed with me. He was a bit of a psycho. And I didn't realise he was on hardcore drugs. But I never knew. Because people are good at masking things. Just like I used to do myself. And then yeah, it turned into like two violent attacks, where he held me hostage and then I was sexually assaulted. ...

And then what happened (during the pandemic) the court case for the assault and the GBH and all of that, went to court. Went to court where I had to give witness statement. ... before then I started having panic attacks and I didn't know that was due to the alcohol consumption as well. Panic attacks, anxiety, I was in either in fight or flight mode. I got severe depression. I started to lock myself in the bathroom in the bath for days.

I went [to court] on the first day, all smartly dressed and ready to give my witness statement. But it didn't happen on the first day. And the second day when I was actually meant to give a statement and stand on trial. I mean I didn't give it physically because I was scared. I was giving it by video link. And then obviously, I was summoned to court obviously. So, I had to attend. From then, on I started drinking more... I was losing a lot of weight and then I wasn't eating very much cause I was drinking every day. I was suppressing my appetite and drinking every day, every day, and then I wasn't eating anything. And I was dehydrated. So, I kept on having allergic reactions and then my sister had to come round and administer the EpiPen on me. And then it was her. She saw my skin and bones and she's like 'you're going to nothing, you're wasting away'. And then yeah, she recognised, and I saw her face and I, it hit a, it hit a nerve. It basically pulled on my heart strings because she was like, "Oh I don't want you to die. You're my big sister, I don't want nothing to happen to you". ...

I stopped drinking. And then I started having panic attacks. I sat in the bath for days. I sat in the bath for seven days without coming in and out. And I went to the school, and I told them to support me. Because I said, this is what's happening, and I can't manage it, and then yeah, they supported me. They would come and collect my daughter every day. But then I couldn't get out the bath. And I couldn't get out the bath cause of the withdrawals symptoms as well... I'm sitting in the bath, I'm not drinking anything, I'm not eating anything. And yeah, I was having kidney failure, didn't recognise that. I admitted myself into A&E. And I said yeah, this is what's happening. I don't know what's going on with my body...



Biro - Parenting and child custody

...I would say that problematic drinking and in fact instant foray into alcoholism was as a direct result of my inability to cope with difficult situations and feelings arising out of it.... I was hiding under the carapace of, you know this kind of, em, you know, nothing was ever gonna get me down. I mean, it's like a shield, and eh, I was hiding underneath it.

Between 27 and 28 really, is my problematic drinking. And I knew I was in trouble with drinking. I mean I knew that...I started to mark bottles ehm yaknow, I became a secret drinker. My attitude towards drink changed. I, I may not have a drink when I went outside you know, when I went out with people because I knew I had a bit of drink at home. ...

I was very impressed with myself that we had a child. And I didn't drink whilst I was pregnant and so on and so on. I was very impressed. I knew that as soon as I went back to work, I knew that I would start drinking because of course she would be on the bottle... And I think that he was desperately worried and concerned about first of all, about the welfare and safety of the child...the marriage just went. I mean, y'know I was taken to court, I was taken to court as an unfit mother. And he took the baby away from me...She was a few months old. Maybe about 10 months old, perhaps less than that. Very concerned about that. But also, as a partner of a drinking alcoholic, his mental health wasn't very good. I mean all he could think about is 'is she going to be alright, when I get home?'

And you'd think that by removing the child from the family home would actually stop me from drinking. And I think that was what his intention was. It didn't stop me from drinking but is certainly catalysed my drinking. I got to my rock bottom much more quickly. I mean I think he did me a big favour. I mean, I think it was very harsh and very cruel – it felt to me at the time, but it was absolutely the best thing he did... I didn't fight for the custody of the child. Erm I was just too ill...I sent my parents a telegram. I knew I had to ask for help. When I was at my rock bottom. I was at that jumping off place. I knew I had to stop, but I didn't know how I was going to stop. And I needed help... three weeks later, my dad was in this country. I was very lucky.

...I was four years sober. I got my act together. I went back to my profession. I became fully self-supporting financially. ... So yeah, I stayed in (place in England) for about four years and made a re- application to get joint custody, which I'd got. And that's when I made the second most important decision of my life, which was to make it absolutely clear that I wasn't going to prize my daughter away from (place in England). That she was going to stay where she was, and if anybody was going to do the moving, it was going to be me...



TABOO
STIGMA
JUDGEMENT
200 KG

JOB TITLE
COUNSELLOR

STOP
DRINKING
AND WE'LL
GET YOU
HELP

EMOTIONS

AUGUST 22

EMERGENCY AMPULANCE

10:00
SOCIAL
SERVICES
05:01

Daljinder - Guilt, shame and stigma

Although my daughter was quite young, she was noticing I was sleeping a lot the next day. And I, I had a lot of guilt and shame around that. I, even though I thought at the time, I was pulling it off. And you know, I'm okay and she's okay, she's safe. But I wasn't present. I wasn't present a lot of the time. And she would say, 'Mum, mum, wake up. Let's do this.' And I do have a lot of guilt around that, that I'm still sort of processing, a lot of guilt... I think things hit rock bottom when like he (husband) started sort of really shaming me for it. He'd say 'Oh you're drunk, you're drunk.' And I'd say, 'Well look, you are. You're, you're drunk.' And I think I started feeling really guilty and shameful. ... And he would, and he would shame me in front of our daughter a lot.

... I remember waking up on the sofa of my house [after an overdose]. ... And then paramedics saying we're gonna call social services now. We're gonna inform social services, cause it's a safeguarding concern, and you know. And then I thought, well, I wish I'd taken the lot now, cause I'm gonna lose my daughter now. So I might as well carry on drinking. I just don't know how I got into such a spiral. I ended up in hospital, and of course then I had social services on my case... my mum and dad were just looking at me with complete disgust and shame. Just complete disgust. My mum was like 'How can you do this? When did you start drinking so much? And why are drinking?'. She was just saying things like "I didn't need this, I don't deserve this. Me and your dad don't need this and deserve this".

I stopped drinking for a while. ... I think shame and guilt played a huge part, cause I think everybody knows us in our town and it's such a small place. And there's so much judgement around women drinking, and how they should be as a wife and a mother. Still, I think there's still a lot of stigma and taboo and judgement. And that pushed my drinking and mental health into more, I took to hiding it, hiding it and the shame attached. And the secrets, and the lies... But accessing help was my biggest – I ended up going to the Sikh Temple, to the Gurdwara to ask for help. And they said, – I remember them saying 'Stop drinking and then we'll get you help'... the Parda of the Gurdwara, yeah. And I was asking for help not just for me, but for (my ex-husband) as well.

But I can't get over the shame and the guilt. The guilt and the shame cripples me. Like I'm still battling this addiction and I've come to accept that it's gonna be a lifelong addiction. ... I'm trying but it's ongoing.

Addiction is not linear. It's an ongoing issue. I think it's managing emotions, managing trauma, managing co-dependency, managing relationships with my parents, my ex-husband, myself, my daughter. And it needs healing. All of that needs healing and counselling and talking. ... my spiritual journey with Sikhism is ongoing. And I find that helpful... I find it very comforting. Cause addiction's a lonely place.



Raj - Drinking at university to cope with fear and anxiety

I went to university at the age of 18. And I think that's where it all started for me... And I would say that I probably got to uni, having led quite a sheltered life. Not very experienced because, you know, our culture is very protective. Probably extremely sheltered and you know, it's very much about not picking up bad habits, which are outside of our culture, yaknow... But leading up to it, I didn't think I would drink. But I think the stress I felt, of all of a sudden, being on my own at uni, in a hall of residence, being surrounded by, I don't think anybody there was Indian. I didn't want to get married, I didn't want to have an arranged marriage, to be honest. So I think going to university was probably a way out, you know. And I was the first in the family and there's also an element of pride isn't there, in our parents, that 'ah you know our daughters going off to university' and stuff like that.

There were some (Asian people) on the course of course, but I did halls of residence. And I had moved out of (home city). I hadn't gone with any friends. Literally on my own... And I would remember thinking, 'oh my God, I've made a mistake. I shouldn't be here. I think - I don't think I can do this. I can't imagine being here for three years. Oh my god, what am I gonna do'. And I really, you know in those days you didn't have mobile phones. I really felt I should ring my mum and dad and tell them to come back and get me. That's how I felt... So, I think I, to join in, to fit in, to have a go I guess, I had a drink. And it - I remember it very clearly and very vividly. You know, I remember that it had, it made me feel almost euphoric. It made me feel excited, but at the same time it seemed to take away any stress, anxiety, nervousness, or self-consciousness I felt at that time. And the more I drank, the more I felt loose... So that was my first introduction, and I took to it like duck to water. I took to it very quickly. I drank, I was drinking every day.

I tried to get through [the university course] as best as I can, and pass. ... My drinking wasn't totally out of control because you know, there was moments where clarity would come in ... Well, I'd finished uni and I'd come back. Hadn't passed. I'd got as far as a HND.

[Later] I regularly went to AA and I went back to uni. ... And things were falling into place. I started to understand about how drink had become a Dutch courage, a crutch, a dependency. A way to manage my anxiety, my fear, my self-consciousness. So, when I was going through uni the second time, with AA, I was going through exactly the same problems, but I had a different approach to dealing with it. And AA gave, AA gave something which is you go to a meeting, and you talk. You talk about how you feel, you cry, you get angry, you, you voice, you see. And I think, I think in our culture we don't do that. In our culture we live [behind] closed doors.

You can talk about certain things, and certain things are taboo. And it's even worse if you're a girl.

Banto - Becoming a "proper alcoholic"

Later on, I became alcoholic properly. I worked (in a company) for 14 years and enjoyed it. I've got retired at the age of 60, on the medical basis. I felt alone at home, so started drinking brandy. I felt alone because my husband was at the business all the time. My children had studied, they'd married and settled, I didn't have any grandchildren (at the time). And I started drinking brandy. I had two knee replacement surgery. After I recovered, I started going out with my lady friends and drank. I used to go to each other's houses. We were very clever ladies. We can drink at home yeah! No one knows. All Asian friends. All of them, and they could handle (drinking), it was only (me)... I never thought I'm an alcoholic. That was the start period yeah.

(Three years after retirement) I fell very ill with sepsis and was very ill and obese. I did go to India. Fell ill, came back, did not have proper treatment. And I was advised to have gastro-bypass. Luckily, I was offered. After my illness and operation, I lost all my weight – and then started my alcoholism, actual alcoholism. I started drinking more and more.

I was so drunk and I told everyone in my family I drink very heavy, I told them. I did not accept I had a problem. Only thing, that I drink too much... I told my son in-law...He knew.. his father is an alcoholic...He's educated, he understood how I can be cured. I did not know. I didn't have any clue.

My family decided to send me to the treatment centre... I thought, 'oh yeah, I'll go there and get treated and come back'. I didn't know that I have to work, I thought that I will go there, to stop my, to give me, I thought that I go there to limit my drink. ... I was the only Indian person there. They were all white... I stayed there six weeks. I did not have a clue... I thought I'll go to a hotel with someone, I'll enjoy myself... I used to think this place is not for me. This place is not for me! This is only for people who take drugs... I thought I'm very exclusive. Only people are druggies and I told them 'this is not for me'...

Used to go to AA meeting every night. Did not understand AA. I used to be just full of darkness. I came back in October after six weeks, did not attend any AA meetings, thought that is it 'I'm recovered now'. After three months, in January, I said 'let me have just one drink, I will be okay'. There started my alcoholism again... I didn't think about anything in the family, apart from me. How I was, I felt lonely and sad and said, inside myself – I can't be an alcoholic. I do all the housework, cooking, extra.



Suman - Realising the impact and needing help

... it all came to a stage, 2 – 2.5 years ago. ... I just needed help. And I think that was it. It was a cry for help. And I had massive support from my husband but also my family, my parents, my sister, my brother. They all knew, and they just were waiting for me to, almost hit rock bottom, before they, they could actually physically come in and help me.... It was (hard for them). Especially for my Mum. I felt really bad for my Mum, and I really regret everything I've put her through. Because she's seen it with my Dad. And then now with her own daughter. So, you know, it was hard, it's hard, but she's, she's a very strong steadfast woman. She is, you know, she is incredible. And always don't give her enough credit for that so [tears] Sorry I'm gonna get a bit emotional, so yeah... No, it's not people making (me feel bad). It's just me. And it's just you know when you remember your actions. And you remember how your behaviour was. And what you've said and things like that. ... I have to just move on and get over that now.

And yeah two and a half years ago... I call it 'D day', I call it the day that I actually realised that there's, there's more to my life. I've got so much more to offer. And I wasn't giving my, my whole to my daughter, to my husband, to my business, to anything. So yeah.. it was coming to a point where I was sort of blacking out during the day. And, you know, then if I needed to go and drive, I wouldn't be able to. Or, you know, I would drive and it would be no, I might kill somebody. I might kill myself. ... My daughter was two and a half at that point and I thought, that's too – she needs a Mum. She needs me and she needs me to be at my best self. I didn't want her to grow up thinking 'oh well, Mum's always sitting there just slumped in a corner or just sleeping all the time'. And I couldn't do any activities with her or anything, it was left to my husband to do, so it really just, it was a, kind of almost like an awakening.

... I think with my family there was – nothing was ever spoken about. We were very sort of closed and there was no feelings or emotions shared. Whereas, in my husband's family they all talked about their feelings. Whereas I'm still not ready to do that. But I'm trying to do that more so with my daughter now. And... just a fear of being judged as well. The fear of I'll bring shame to that family, you know. I've already brought shame to my own family. (nervous laugh) It's bringing shame to a new family...

I tried to go AA. But I just wasn't comfortable there. ... And then I found an online, a couple of support groups online, and, you know, to be honest that's helped me the most... (I joined) a huge, huge group and I, I joined that for a couple of months. And I came off it and I found a smaller group... That has been my lifeline. That has actually saved me, because no one judged me on there. They just welcomed me in... There's a couple of Asian women in the (group)... yeah it was a lifesaver.



Sukhi - Cultural isolation in services

I started with AA to begin with, but I'd go to AA drunk. I'd be drinking. The thing is when you drink that much you're not the typical drunk.

Nobody can really tell, because you are just always saturated in alcohol. And I was quite well behaved. I wasn't one of these rowdy drunks. Never spoke up in AA. None of that... I'm the only brown girl there. Any NA, AA meeting I've been to, I'm the only Indian girl there. [There were Asian men] they were just a bit shocked I think. They didn't talk to me, they just sort of looked and looked away and looked again, then looked away... The Indian mentality continued in those groups... Other than when it comes to my family, I don't really care about these other Indians and their thoughts and mentalities. I'm just like I can barely deal with my parents. If you think I'm gonna take on your problems, you've got another thing coming. But it wasn't for me.

... And I used to go with friend... he's Asian. His brothers' an alcoholic. And he too had. He's Sikh and they, used to drink a lot... Yeah it was nice to have him there because he was quite supportive. But to go alone it wasn't.

I spoke to him (friend) but eventually I was, I went to a local drug and alcohol service. That's when the receptionist gave me a number. And I called them myself. [I realised] that's it's down to me to get it sorted. Nobody's going to be able to understand or help. And it still feels that way to a certain extent... It was okay. I didn't really – again being the only Indian girl there. They didn't quite understand the nuances of what it is to be Indian and an addict, and to be going through all of this... I mean it was wonderful speaking to other addicts, don't get me wrong.

But there are certain things that you, I didn't really wanna talk about, because they just weren't gonna get it... They wouldn't necessarily get [the cultural values]. The other thing I've noticed is we still try and protect, I still try to protect my family. And I'm just thinking you know, speaking to another Indian. Usually the judgement – Indian mentality is just awful. The judgement that comes with it. ...

I have been in therapy for a while now, for obvious reasons. ... she's just a very good therapist. She's got, even though she's not Indian herself, she's, her sister-in-law is. And she understands a lot about how messed up Indian culture is.

I'm a proud Indian, don't get me wrong. But given the choice, I don't associate with Indian people. And, it's sad because I am a proud Indian. I speak my mother tongue. I love my food. I love the culture. The people not so much. I'd rather stay clear of them.



Ravi - Turning point

... I was seeing [a counsellor] on and off. But the drinking was still happening quite a lot. I had an enabler, I had somebody at work that I'd spend a lot of time with. And we would just drink together, very unhelpful. Making me think that I wasn't as bad as I was, because I had somebody else... I left my job because they tried to get me on a disciplinary... But at this point, mum and dad had returned to India. Now I'm without a job, at home, winter, drinking. Nowhere to go, no friends... On my own. Nobody, the only you know, the only social life I had was from the work that's gone. And then January came round and I think I just had a really crappy weekend where I just didn't want to talk to anybody. And my parents had been trying to call me. I hadn't answered the phone. Stupid of me not to think that they're gonna panic. So, I was a bit surprised when I'm sat there on a Sunday afternoon, watching TV and two of my neighbours walked into the house. So, they'd let themselves in. And I kind of broke down then, and I just thought, 'you're in a – this is bad now'. Your mum and dad have had to send people from the street round to check on you. This is, this has got to stop. And I feel like I just surrendered at that point... When you have two of your neighbours who, we've lived in this street since I was seven. They've seen me grow up. And they had to come round, to check if I was basically alive or not.

[My parents] arranged and booked a flight for me to go to India. February 2020, I got on a plane to India, and I told myself, when I get there, when I land 'that is it. I'm not gonna drink anymore'. And I didn't, that was it. Like, just this feeling, just this knowing that, that's it now. And I was okay with it, so bizarre. Really strange. And a realisation that you are so miserable and unhappy in the life that you're living. But you know you either try to like leave it, and that's not worked. So, the only way to change it is for you to change it. Cause you can't put, you know I had been playing the victim for so long. And I knew that now and I had to turn it [around] – it was down to me...

Six weeks after I'd arrived (in India) and all of a sudden lock down. That was all a little bit strange. But in that, it gave me the time to really, really do a lot of work on myself. You know, suddenly you've got all this time... I didn't access any support while I was out there because I'd made this decision in my head. It didn't feel hard, but I'd taken some books out there with me, that just happen to be these personal development books that I'd been recommended a few months ago... And I started reading them and aw just, things started to make sense. And I started to see the bigger picture, and I started to do so much work on like, my mindset, and how you know, the beliefs and the thoughts I'd been carrying with my, with me for so long. And started to spend a long time meditating on walks. And just taking myself off and being with myself. And I got very spiritual, it's always been a part of me, but I never really focused on it.



HER SUPPORT IS THE MOST BIGGEST REASON FOR ME TURNING IT AROUND

Gita - Support through school and Asian support worker

... I got into a service more through the school... I think it's because they kept catching me. I wasn't very smart about it. So they'd catch me out. ... I think there was always that fear there. Erm, obviously family finding out and what's the consequences and fear of that.

Definitely, I was aware of it. I knew that was a problem. But luckily enough, they had no clue. So, I was lucky in that sense. The fear is always there... I think at the time, it was difficult. Constantly hiding stuff. It was just like making sure that when I go home I need to make sure that I'm sober. I need to make sure obviously I don't look tired. So it was constantly thinking about those things before I set foot in the house.

The day I was supposed to meet (the support worker at a new service) I ended up in hospital... I attempted an overdose... Probably about 16/17... I think I just got to the point where I was just like 'I've had it.' Like, I'm done with the same old stuff. I'm done with kind of putting it out there and dealing with issues. I'm just done with it. And that's it... So, the very next day I was literally back at college as normal, like nothing has happened. Erm and then obviously my tutors found out about it, everything like that... And when (support worker) came to see me, they actually had to tell them what had happened... And then from there that's when I was like no, I can't - I need to sort it out. For me, it was very easy like you have to do it. That's the only way... I wasn't really concerned with the stigma because it wasn't really in my mind to seek help in the first place. Erm, but for me, it was more of I need the help instead of feeling like 'Oh, this is not the right thing to be doing as an Asian girl!' It was more just I need the help, I need to talk.

But after a while, it's just got to a point where it's just like you have no choice. But I think like, with [the service] because it was (that support worker) like we got along quite well. Asian mentality for a start. For her, it was literally just like what's going on? What do you need help with... It was like weekly meetings. How can I watch how much I'm drinking each week, how much most weeks. Trying to look at its usage. What's different, what's working, what's not? Erm, so with her, she was very, she looked more at what is effective. So, she sees something isn't working, she'll scrap it, 'Let's start again'. That to be honest is the biggest help. To be fair, her support is the most biggest difference probably for me turning round.

I did have one friend that I spoke to quite a lot about it. ... He would talk and I would feel like good, because I know he understands me. I feel like a lot of people you talk to, especially Asians, they don't understand the process of getting to that point. They just see the point that you're at and that's it.



Kuli - Support at work - "I wasn't told to leave"

I think deep down I did know, but I didn't wanna, I was very, quite in denial, but I didn't want others to know that I knew I had a problem with alcohol, if that makes sense. I still maintained it. I said look you know, I've got a child, married, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. You know, education tick, tick, tick. I've got a job, got a career tick, tick, tick. So, I was still sort of in that place.

And it was only up until when I looked for a new job, I was sort of fed up with the work I was doing. Came across a job for (a drug and alcohol service), I didn't know what they were about, I'd never heard of them. So, I had a teacher sort of qualification and the role there, they were looking for someone as a training officer. And I thought, okay let's try this. Got the job, and basically, every time I'd come in, I had such a sense of belonging, a connection with my colleagues. And not just that, there was such a way about how they were working, so different to mainstream, absolutely different. There was lots of things like we'd have a morning check-in. I didn't know what a morning check-in was and what it's about. But it was absolutely brilliant. It was the best thing I've ever sort of had to kick start my morning. And a lot of the time I used to come in and I'll go 'I'm feeling really anxious. You know, I'm feeling really, sort of, low in myself, or you know, I don't feel worthy or whatever And the beautiful thing about this process was that throughout the day, you've got colleagues taking care of you and watching out for you and supporting you.

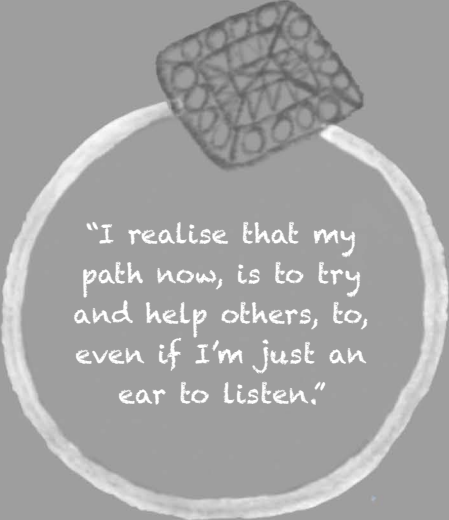
But the beautiful thing about the organisation was, my colleague, one of my very close colleagues, he was my sponsor. He used to sit opposite me and, he'd say he'd go 'What mask have you got on today?' So that really made me feel like oh my God I'm so paranoid thinking has he seen me at the weekend? Has he seen me in the supermarket, picking up three, four bottles of whatever? Or has someone told him that I'm a drinker? Can he smell it on my breath? Or, all that, so I was very paranoid. And then bit by bit through each month, it just sort of, stripped away that I wasn't judged. I wasn't stereotyped, I was understood, and I could talk about what was going on. And I had the opportunity, one of my managers, to continue my work but then go into recovery. So, I wasn't tarnished, I wasn't told to leave. I wasn't told to sort of have, you know, a break or an extension probation sort of period, or anything like that. I was very fortunate that they worked with me. And I very quickly stopped the drug addiction anyway.

... And then, in time I slowly stopped drinking. I, I, you know, when I was doing my counselling, my therapy that I was offered through work. And I was very fortunate to keep doing that. And then they had to work with how I had to stop the binge drinking and then slowly, slowly come off and stop, which I managed to do.

Moving into recovery

The experiences in this book make powerful and difficult reading. However, it is important to note that all of these women have had the support, strength and resilience to change their drinking. The final words of this book reflect this:

"I've been drug and alcohol free three months. Three months. I'm really happy about it, because yeah. I couldn't function. I couldn't do anything. I'm really happy, but I knew from a long time that I needed the support, but it was just getting the support. And now that I have like a whole team of people behind me, I just feel like - I feel happier."



"I realise that my path now, is to try and help others, to, even if I'm just an ear to listen."

"I've had 14 years, 13-14 years here now at (recovery organisation). And this is like my, home, my family, my safe haven, everything, you know, just here. And I have the opportunity to do more for, especially our community, our girls, our women. Who are still struggling, very much struggling. Yeah."

ANTI DEPRESSANTS

"I'm not just in recovery, I live recovery. And I'm doing so many things. I've achieved so many things in the last two years. And it is almost like saying we do recover you know. There is life after addiction."

"They said to me in rehab you just need to change one thing. Everything! So I don't put myself in those kind of situations anymore... what I've got from alcohol and drugs, I get from meditation and my relationship with God."

"So alcohol has no place in my life. My partner drinks, she has a drink at home, I don't mind. I do go to pubs and restaurants where there is a bar. But I don't go there, I go there to meet friends, I go there to meet family. I have a healthy respect for alcohol, which is, it doesn't figure in my life..."

"I think, if anything, out of all of this, I try to talk more. I'd like to help our Asian communities not let shame and guilt and judgement get in the way of addictions and seeking help. But it's huge work that is. It's huge."

Support Services

EACH (Ethnic Alcohol Counselling in Hounslow)

Telephone: 020 8577 6059

Email: info@eachcounselling.org.uk

KIKIT Drug and Alcohol Support

Telephone: 0121 448 3883

Email: info@kikitproject.org

Lucy Faithfull Foundation (Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse)

Telephone: Stop In Now! Confidential Helpline – 0808 1000 900

Email: contact@lucyfaithfull.org.uk

Muslim Women's Network Helpline

Telephone: 0800 999 5786 or 0303 999 5786 or text 07415

Email: info@mwnhelpline.co.uk

NAPAC (National Association for People Abused in Childhood)

Telephone: 0808 801 0331 (Monday-Thursday 10am-9pm and Friday 10am-6pm)

Email: support@napac.org.uk

National Domestic Abuse Helpline (run by Refuge)

Telephone: 0808 2000 247 (24 hours a day)

Email (via website): <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/Contact-us>

Rape Crisis England and Wales

Telephone: 0808 802 9999 (every day between 12-2.30pm and 7-9.30pm)

Rape Crisis Live Chat: Live Chat is a free, text-based support service. For more information please go to <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/want-to-talk/>

ROSHNI (Supports Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic communities (BAME) affected by domestic abuse)

24 Hour Multilingual Domestic Abuse Helpline: Tel: 0800 953 9666

24 Hour West Midlands BAME Forced Marriage & Honour Based Abuse Helpline: 0800 953 9777

Sikh Helpline UK

Telephone: 03000 300063/07999 004 363 (24 hours a day)

Email info@sikhhelpline.com



This book has emerged from a larger research project exploring alcohol use by South Asian women and their needs for an effective service response (Galvani, Fox, Guru, Khan, 2023).

It was funded by Alcohol Change UK through its New Horizons grant programme and conducted by researchers at Manchester Metropolitan University, England.

It was supported by a number of specialist service provider partners in England including Kik-It, Each, and AVA.

August 2023

