NHS
Leeds and York Partnership
NHS Foundation Trust

Our Workforce Race Equality Network (WREN)

Stories to inspire and empower











integrity | simplicity | caring

Contents

Foreword

"We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now. We are one people with one family."
- **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

These words could never be truer. Over the past two years members of our Workforce Race Equality Network (WREN) and colleagues at Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust have become a closer family unit. A family that shares the same dreams and desires to belong, be our best selves and grow together.

The global pandemic coupled with Black Lives Matter unearthed emotions we never thought we would experience and brought to our doorstep multiple bereavements, loneliness, and separation. This challenging period also opened opportunities for curiosity, bravery, and hope.

This anthology is from members of the Workforce Race Equality Network, of reflections, of their world, over the years.

As the chair of our Workforce Race Equality Network, I had the opportunity to walk in members' shoes, to see the world through their eyes and encourage dialogues. In our weekly then monthly network blogs members shared openly and honestly their experiences and talked about what really mattered to them. Conversations were held on how to cope with daily struggles, dispel myths about the COVID19 vaccine, racism, and spiritual needs.

The experience was shared through words that were empowering, yet beautiful and gentle, which allowed the readers to connect with members on their journeys. We learnt that we did not have all the answers and that was ok, to embrace each other's expertise and always be supportive.

These inspirational blogs have transformed our thinking. They have allowed us to open a part of ourselves, our hearts, that we would not normally share publicly, to be vulnerable and in so doing create a new level of unity.

"I am inspired as I look around, look how far we've come and that counts, let's be thankful as another year ends, we are in this together till the end." Dr Miriam Isaac.

As you read the anthology my hope is that you too become inspired by the written words from our members, that their personal journey allows you to reflect on your own journey during this global pandemic and remind you of your inner strength and beauty.

Wendy Tangen
Chair, Workforce Race Equality Network (WREN)

Becoming your true self

Wendy Tangen
Clinical Services, Inclusion Lead

I have never viewed myself as unique. I've always believed that I did not fit in, that I will always be on the outside. As I look around, I am the only person like me in the room and this has, at times, made me feel uncomfortable. No one wants to stand out, so the only thing to do is to go with the flow, be part of the crowd and somehow blend in. Do not upset the status quo and people will invite you into the inner circle – only then would I feel I've made it. A lot of people feel like this. They conform to the norms of what they believe society expects of them. They strip themselves of their identity and lose the essence of who they are.

I've met some wonderful people throughout my life, some of whom I remember vividly, others managed to leave an impression on me despite knowing them for just a fleeting moment. Those experiences and relationships have allowed me to grow and develop into the person I am today.

So, I ask you…who are these people in your life? Who has imprinted on you and made you the person you are today? How much of yourself do you celebrate? And how have you imprinted and connected with others?

When you start to reflect on these questions you begin to realise your true worth. For others to value and accept you, first you need to look inside and appreciate yourself and then I truly believe others will see what you see.

The turning point for me was when my husband proposed… exciting right!!! But it led me to think about my name. What do I call myself? Does my name define me? I thought I knew who I was. I am a daughter, sister, aunt, friend, nurse…the list goes on. But until I began to reflect on my identity, not just my ethnicity and origins but what my soul said, what my values were and what I stood for. It was only then that I began to appreciate my true self.

This process taught me to embrace and celebrate the person I am. It reminded me what was important to me. I began to see my achievements and reflect on how I may have or can influence others. This was priceless stuff – a real journey of self discovery!

If you understand yourself – in your entirety, your behaviours then reflect your values and you become your true self.

Being brave and stepping out of my comfort zone in certain situations can still be a daunting experience. So, I remind myself why it is important not to blend in, to follow the crowd or just play it safe. In today's climate of influencing positive change, it is even more important to stand up for what you believe in and be your true self.

First published March 2020

The inequalities experienced during pandemics

Dr Huma Khan
Core Tranee Doctor

"The likelihood that your acts of resistance cannot stop the injustice does not exempt you from acting in what you sincerely and reflectively hold to be the best interests of your community."
- Susan Sontag

Crises, whether they are economic, political, humanitarian, or as the current pandemic, health related – they test us. They test us as individuals, and they test us as nations. They test every fibre of our existence from the resolve to continue within a sense of normalcy in a construct where nothing remains "normal".

The pandemic challenges us in our professional and personal lives on a continuous basis. However, beyond the trials that we face as individuals, we face constant challenges as a society. The legacies that we will inevitably leave behind once this pandemic subsides will be preserved by history and remain a point of reference and learning for the future generations who will inevitably, at some stage, face pandemics of their own.

The suffering associated with Covid-19 is not restricted merely to economic and political fronts, however, it has presented with ethical and moral dilemmas associated with inequality and discrimination, specifically to this blog, race and ethnicity.

There has been a global rise in the open racism and xenophobia targeted towards the Chinese diaspora who have been vilified and blamed for the spread of Covid-19. These incidents are not restricted to isolated individuals, however, recognised official institutions across the globe have been partaking in such dangerous activities through political speeches, religious rallies and even within educational institutions.

Unfortunately, the dangerous precedent of blaming a specific group of people as vectors of disease, is not new. History is riddled with similar examples of this "othering" process. During the 14th Century Black Death, the Jewish populations were assaulted and ostracised; the Irish Catholics were blamed for the cholera outbreak in 1858 with hospitals for immigrants being burned down; the Chinese population in San Francisco, 1878, was persecuted for the outbreak of smallpox. More recent examples include a prominent Congressman writing to the CDC in 2014 advising them that children from Central America imported diseases to the US.

Whilst our immediate professional priorities have been maintaining the safety of our patients through daily battles of minimal PPE, lack of testing and limited resources – there remains an urgent need to constantly challenge the inequalities that this pandemic brings on an ethical front – and the matter of race becomes crucial in this. The message that we send has to be one of equality, inclusion and be rooted in collective humanity.

First published April 2020

Reflections of a Muslim nurse working in Ramadan

Hafsa Sattar
Staff Nurse

There is a notion in Islam which states that actions are based on your intentions and rewarded as such. As the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) stated:

"the reward of deeds depends on his intentions, and a person will get the reward according to his intention"
- Umar bin Al-Katthab

This has an influence on how I work, as not only do I help those I work with to the best of my ability, but I do so knowing that I am strengthening my faith.

A key part and one of the five pillars of my faith is participating in the month of Ramadan. In addition to abstaining from eating and drinking between sunrise and sunset, Ramadan is a time of self improvement and reflection while refraining from anger and being compassionate and charitable.

There are people who fast daily, not by choice but because they have no other option. This month serves as a firm reminder of this, allowing us to gain understanding and empathy for the less fortunate. It's common for Muslims to come together to break fast (iftaar) and host meals for others, creating a real sense of togetherness and community spirit.

Fasting at work brings its own challenges. Throw a global pandemic into the mix and things get that little bit trickier.

My family are shielding at the moment, so to protect them while I work I have moved out of the family home. This means, as everyone across the UK is experiencing, social gatherings and visiting others isn't possible, and our iftaar meals are no longer a social affair. This has its impacts both culturally and emotionally.

Despite this huge change in my regular Ramadan routine, I have felt that community spirit within the workplace. After explaining Ramadan and what it involves, my colleagues have been so accommodating with swapping shifts, adjusting break times and even bringing in various food and items to help. It's definitely made a huge difference to the Ramadan experience I thought I would be having amidst the pandemic, and as Ramadan comes to an end I can say it has been a positive one given the circumstances.

At times like this I'm reminded of my childhood. A big part of it revolved around being a carer for a close family member with longstanding mental health problems. This is now something I am happy to openly discuss, yet when younger I didn't often disclose it to even my closest of friends.

A common experience for those from an ethnic minority background growing up in westernised society, is feeling out of place or not quite fitting in. A real loss of cultural identity was something I know I felt growing up as a British Pakistani Muslim, but sadly even more so when considering my relative's condition. I don't remember being taught about mental health problems, either through mainstream education or in any cultural / religious settings. When considering physical health, an illness was diagnosed and an appropriate treatment was available. For mental health problems, things weren't as clear and I remember how people weren't encouraged to openly discuss this.

Looking back it's hard to say whether this was a true reflection of my experience or memories of heightened emotions, but I am happy to say that as a Mental Health Nurse, I can see things are changing.

There is more support and services available for both patients and carers. I also feel mental health is becoming more recognised within the Pakistani and Muslim community. A local Islamic education centre has now introduced regular mental health workshops available to everyone and facilitated by professionals, something I would never have imagined happening growing up. Mental health doesn't appear to be as much of a taboo subject anymore, and though it seems we still have a long way to go, things appear to be heading in the right direction.

First published May 2020

The cultural impact of the pandemic and why it's important to talk

Balvinder Dosanjh
Clinical Engagement, Access and Inclusion Co-ordinator

These unprecedented times as everyone keeps calling them, have created many uncertainties and feelings over these last few months. On reflection, not only have I been dealing with my own emotions, which has been a rollercoaster of a journey, but being a British Sikh woman I've also had to deal with the cultural issues that have been very much hand in hand with everything that is going on at the moment.

Being a carer for my mum who is in the vulnerable category is a constant worry, especially when I'm very aware that the BAME community is being hit hard by the virus. Listening to BAME colleagues express fear, anxiety, being scared to speak up, and feeling unsupported is scary.

Having to explain the government briefings to my mum in Punjabi is also difficult, as I don't want her to panic. So I only tell her what I feel is suitable to avoid raising her anxiety levels. This doesn't help when the aunties keep ringing her with their own ideologies and perceptions of the virus, which seem to be different versions of how the virus is in the air, advising her not to leave the house, or telling me to wear full PPE when going to the local supermarket.

For the first time in 40 years I've celebrated Vaisakhi behind closed doors under lockdown. This is supposed to be a very spiritual, joyous time for the Sikh Community, celebrating the birth of Khalsa (Sikh New Year) which would involve thousands of Sikhs going to the Gurdwara (Sikh temple), meeting friends and family, listening to special prayers and hymns, doing a colourful parade to all the local Gurdwaras in Bradford. Instead the community was saddened, having to be enclosed behind four walls and not being able to have contact with loved ones at this very special time.

This had been even more difficult as my dad had been stuck in India after going on holiday there. As a family, the emotional impact this had on our mental health and well-being was immense. The constant fear and worry of him being alone out there and the virus spreading around the world caused panic and unease. We all kept our feelings hidden from one another as talking is not something we do well as a family, or as a community because we are too busy trying to protect one another from being hurt.

Culturally this is an issue that needs addressing within the Sikh community. From childhood we are taught to suppress our feelings and we are encouraged to not be inquisitive, as this can be seen as being disrespectful to our elders. This needs to change, and the only way forward is to educate and raise awareness within our communities about the importance of looking after our mental health and well-being.

Only on my dad's return did I hear of how anxiety provoking he felt his situation was for him and the emotional impact this had on his health and well-being. It's sad to think that we find talking incredibly difficult at times, and made me realise we need to work on this together as it can ease the pain.

Four days before the UK went on lockdown I started a new job. Despite the initial excitement of finally having my dream job, I find myself having to deal with mixed emotions of happiness but uncertainty. Waves of anxiety, irrational thinking, constantly questioning if I'm good enough, or wanting to help my colleagues but not knowing how. The norm is no longer the norm but I've adjusted to new ways of working, along with learning positive coping mechanisms to help look after myself which is helping to keep me positive.

As a Sikh, our Guru Ji has taught us that we come into this world alone and one day we will leave on our own. This couldn't be more poignant as we hear of loved ones dying and we are unable to touch them, follow cultural rituals, mourn as a family, and as a community. All of which will leave a lasting impact on our lives forever.

I've learnt that hard times can also strengthen communities, and my local Sikh community has raised £40,000 to support the NHS to purchase essential ultrasound equipment to use during this pandemic for Covid-19 patients, to help save lives. This shows we can get through difficult times when we look after each other and give one another hope. Things will get better in time we just need to keep the faith.

First published June 2020

My shielding story

Veronica Mukunga
Staff Nurse

When the pandemic hit, almost 1.5million people in the UK were asked to shield themselves for at least 12 weeks as they were deemed to be vulnerable.

I am one of those people.

The first thought that came to my mind was, "what on earth am I going to do at home for 12 weeks while in lockdown? It's not like I can go out shopping or meet up with friends for a meal or drinks, and most importantly I won't be able to visit my family for a while." I had these thoughts and feelings swirling in my head for a couple of days, while at the same time I was trying to find ingenious ways to keep myself occupied, however that was proving to be difficult. I was comfortable and happy with my 'normal' routine before the lockdown. The fulfilment of a rewarding job, and the joys of spending time with my family and friends during my spare time.

I come from an African background with a large family of six siblings. Growing up there were always additional family members living with us; such as my grandmother, cousins, the list is endless. Family is therefore very important to me. Now here I am, stuck in this house on my own with nothing to do besides obsessively tidying and cleaning.

After a while I had to tell myself to stop. I was going through so many different emotions, I felt lonely, scared and guilty. I felt guilty because I was safe in my home, but my colleagues were going to work in an unknown and dangerous situation. I battled with these emotions for a while and did not want to talk to anyone about this as I did not want to appear selfish. I found myself obsessed with the news, checking it all day and calling my friends and family to inform them on latest updates and advice about Covid. At the time I felt I was being helpful protecting the people I cared about.

Then my worst nightmare happened. A friend and colleague passed away from Covid.

The heartache I felt was unbearable. I yearned for a hug. Being alone at a time like this was foreign to me, Zimbabwean funerals are a community affair where everyone feels the grief of the bereaved and share in it. During funerals we have large gatherings where we sing, dance, pray and have many other activities as a way of comforting and healing each other, especially those who were close to the deceased.

Most of my colleagues were devastated by the news and everyone was seeking support from each other. I felt I needed to be strong for them as they too were grieving and had added anxieties about going to work with the belief that they could be infected with Covid and die from it.

I tried my best to be supportive towards my friends and colleagues. We called each other on a regular basis and I made myself available to anyone who wanted to talk about how they felt. I was invited to join a WhatsApp group dedicated to my colleague, where people passed on their condolences and prayed with his family through Zoom links.

Through this I felt a sense of purpose and thanks to modern technology I could see that I was not alone. Within the WhatsApp group some of my colleagues posted links to the WREN group chat, and I am now actively involved. I have made connections with staff across our Trust who I had never met before and I really appreciate the support and education that the group provides. It's good to know that I am not on my own in this situation. We share our experiences and feelings and I get to make a contribution which makes me feel valued.

Today I sat in my kitchen writing a blog for the first time in my life. It was challenging and writing is not my strongest point, but I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and I did it. I've even started gardening as a new hobby with encouragement of WREN group members.

As the Covid pandemic continues what I do know is that I am not alone and together we can be strong for each other.

First published June 2020

In this together

Dr Miriam Isaac
Consultant Psychiatrist

There are times in our lives
When things don't even out
Even if that's not what we desire
It makes us stop and take account
Of who we are and what really counts
Those matters of life are at times
Beyond our comprehension and maybe that's just fine!

Another year has gone by
Remember those moments when
our souls felt tired
Compassion and hope never ceased to flow
From within our hearts to those we cared for.
What a year we've had together
With all its ups and downs
Despite all that we've been through
We came together to help heal this wound.

This too is amazing
To be part of a bigger calling
It took a storm for us to realise
That we are not in the same boat
And our burdens are not alike.

Is it possible to miss those moments
Of resolve and gratitude that surrounds?
To have a chance to have and hold
Everything that matters to us the most!

What makes us so unique if you ask me
Lies within in our own stories
Give those stories a chance to be heard
So much more we can then learn
In every line that I write
I now see those journeys come alive
I am inspired as I look around
Look how far we've come and that counts
Let's be thankful as another year ends
We are in this together till the end.

First published November 2021

The Colour Black, a personal perspective

Dr Babor James Aganren
Core Trainee Doctor

I was told that the doctor's first words on the day I was born were "this child is going to be really black" and he was right. Growing up as a child, there was a lot of banter about my colour. Some joked that I could blend into the shadows easily if I didn't show my teeth, others said that I was the highest form of blackness and anyone who had a darker skin than mine was colourless. I made sure to reply that my colour meant that I was a more authentic African than they were, among the dark skinned I was and still am king.

I took enormous pride in my skin colour in my younger years and still do till this day, maybe because of the attention it got me. I would enter a room and people would comment about me being a true ebony. It made me feel special, easily identifiable, and it was easy to describe me and I was really popular for it. The first letter of my name even had the letter B which fitted nicely. When I look at myself in the mirror, I see a tall, dark and handsome prince. My wife will disagree with the tall part though but she is just not seeing what I see my Black is wonderful.

It was a bit of a surprise when I discovered that this skin colour which I have so much pride for happened to be seen in a negative light by some in the western world. I was continuously teased as a child for my colour but I was never judged by it. On reflection however, I realised that some of this bias came from limited contact with people who look like me and maybe the negative portrayal of Africa and those of African descent by the media. I thought it was worth describing what the colour black means to me from my experiences as a black male.

Some symbolisms for the colour black which I found after a Google search include; "Black is associated with power, fear, mystery, strength, authority, elegance, aggression, authority, rebellion, and sophistication. Black is required for all other colours to have depth and variation of hue". I couldn't have said it better myself. To me Black is powerful. It is strong. It is filled with authority. It is mysterious. It is beautiful and elegant. It is sophistication in itself. It is needed for all other colours to have depth. It is extremely kind and full of life, so of course Black Matters!

First published June 2020

My ancestry and me

Dympna Edwin
Occupational Therapist

Last year I embarked on something amazing, something that I had been thinking about for a number of years. I got myself an Ancestry DNA Testing Kit!

I was born and grew up in Huddersfield. My parents are from Carriacou, a small island north of Grenada in the Caribbean. In the 1950s and 60s they, along with thousands of young people, were invited to this 'mother country' to fill the labour shortages that had arisen.

My father worked in the textile industry and studied English and Photography in his spare time. My mother managed the family and home. On reflection, in what was a racially divided Britain at the time, my childhood was pretty uneventful. As one of five children close in age I was always part of a group so I rarely felt intimidated. However, this certainly changed for me when I left the family unit.

The year was 1980 and I left home to study Occupational Therapy in the city of York. I was the only black student on the campus. I saw few black or brown people around the city and I felt desperately alone and unhappy. To make matters worse, regular racist name-calling and chants became part of my daily experience. In fact, as I write this blog, I find myself recalling a couple of frightening incidents and I think to myself …did that really happen?

By the end of the first year I was ready to leave but I didn't. I persevered, supported by my family, a developing Christian faith, a supportive Church community, and a Jamaican woman I met in York one sunny afternoon. She quickly became my mentor, confidante and friend.

When the academic year was over, my mum was able to return to Carriacou for the first time since she'd arrived in Britain in 1960 and I was thrilled to go with her. After my experiences in York I needed to find a place of peace and belonging, and initially I did. The first thing I noticed, other than the baking heat, was that people looked like me. I felt at home and this was further enhanced when an elderly brown skinned woman looked up at me and enquired "whose child is you? Is you papa son's granddaughter? "I was in heaven.

The following day we visited my mother's side of the family with whom we were closest to in England. We had travelled to the part of the island where the Europeans had settled. A small, elderly woman came running out to my mum and I was taken aback! Although I knew my mum's family was mixed-heritage, I did not expect to see a wrinkled, Caucasian woman, her face drenched with tears embracing my mother. When they paused for breath, this elderly cousin looked up and saw me. Addressing my mum she exclaimed "Monika, who dat little black child?" I was six feet tall.

It was not so much of what she said, but how she said it! My mouth dropped open. For a moment, I was back in York, feeling shocked and embarrassed.

From that day I made it my goal to increase my knowledge and learn more about the slave trade from the perspective of Africa and the barbaric dehumanisation and enslavement of its people for over four centuries by Britain and Europe. I discovered that the native inhabitants of the Caribbean were exterminated and replaced by enslaved Africans to toil in the plantations for the greed and economic prosperity of Britain and Europe. Treated worse than animals, African men, women and children were brutalised and murdered. I recognised the truth that had been hidden in my history lessons. The truth that Britain as we know it, was financed and shaped by the colonisation and the enslavement of African people.

The more I learnt the angrier I became, the more I saw the sadder I felt. The more I experienced the more empowered I became to ensure that these atrocities would not overwhelm or destroy my integrity and faith. Nearly 40 years on I have come to understand and accept that the histories of Africa and Europe are painfully intertwined. The recent riots in the UK sparked off by the murder of George Floyd in the USA by a white police officer, demonstrates that the legacy of slavery remains.

Last year I did something amazing and got an Ancestry DNA Testing Kit and sent it off. Two weeks later I read the results on my mobile phone with delight.

Dympna Edwin, Lesser Antilles African Caribbean, 69% African, 31% European. Of course I celebrated! Finally, the curiosity I had held for years about the ethnic make-up of my own family and myself was answered. I celebrated with my green-eyed daughter and my brown-eyed son!

Through understanding, forgiveness, and love for my family, I have come to embrace both parts of my genealogy. At the end of the day I believe that as humans we have the capacity to do good and evil. Whatever we choose to do, the truth in time always comes to light and there will always be consequences to face, whether that be by the present or future generations. Once we appreciate and respect that we are equal beings with similar desires and goals, unique skills and talents, and vulnerabilities and strengths, this world will be a safer, kinder and fairer place.

First published July 2020

A father's conversation: reflections on racism and hope

Robin Ellis
Clinical Engagement, Access and Inclusion Co-ordinator

My 9 year old daughter asked me if there will always be racism, in light of the George Floyd incident and consequent local and international protests around the Black Lives Matter movement. That question had me thinking about a conversation I had with my mother some 40 years ago, and my own experiences of racism.

My mother came to the UK in 1961 and would I guess be classed as one of the Windrush generation. Recalling some of her own experiences she spoke about discrimination in the workplace, such as being offered jobs over the phone but once she was seen in person the job would miraculously disappear. My Mum was educated in the West Indies but was offered menial jobs once in the UK while living in poor housing conditions, and yes she did see those signs saying No Blacks allowed.

Reflecting on my own experiences of racism can be a sobering process. I remember many incidents of overt and subtle forms of racism I have experienced. Growing up in Hackney in London, I had a best friend who was white in primary school. I can still remember his name. He supported Arsenal like me and we got on really well. Looking back now I never saw race, you tend not to at that age. We would hang out after school and weekends and he would come to my house where he would be welcomed by my mother and siblings.

For some reason I could never go to his place. On the one and only occasion he did invite me to his house, I remember playing in his room when he suddenly told me I had to hide under his bed because his Mum and Dad were coming home and they would be angry to see a black person in their house. I can't remember my thoughts or feelings then, but I do remember hiding under that bed as quiet as a mouse until they went out again. By the time we reached secondary school our friendship was over, he with his white friends, me with my black friends. The lines had been drawn.

I also remember asking a girl out in primary school, I know I should've been concentrating on my books! To my delight she said yes, but by the next morning she told me she couldn't see me as her father warned her of seeing black boys.

These were just two of my early experiences of racism and not fully understanding why I was perceived so negatively.

In the early 1980s my brother and I went to Scarborough for a family holiday and I remember us both having to run away from a group of white boys shouting racial abuse at us. They sure didn't want to sell us any rock. Other incidents growing up included hearing car doors lock when I would walk past them on my way to University.

I tried not to take it personally, saying to myself that race maybe had nothing to do with it and that it might happen with any other boy. These are the internal discussions you have with yourself. Ultimately though these experiences leave you a little scarred. Finally one of my worst gripes would be getting asked if I had drugs to sell when at a nightclub. I also experienced this waiting in line at a nightclub in Amsterdam, so I guess this phenomenon is international.

There is a term called "weathering" which was coined by Arline Geronimus in 1970 and is used to describe the accumulative effects of racism and inequalities over time. I think these experiences have definitely had an influence on who I am today.

For balance, I must say that there have been some very kind spirited and wonderful white people who have both influenced and inspired me throughout my life. I know this is more than simply black or white, pardon the pun, it's about people and how you are treated.

So when answering my daughter's question I told her I was hopeful that times would change. I pointed to the young white protesters and told her they give me hope. I told her about the many conversations on race happening up and down the country, if not the world, including my own organisation wanting to discuss issues on race. This gives me hope.

I told her I felt that a climate of change and momentum was in the air, which needs to continue. But most of all I told her my biggest hope was that her generation will continue the call for fairness, equality and opportunity for all, and possibly live in a world where racism is pushed to the margins of society. One can only hope.

Past behaviour doesn't have to be a predictor of future behaviour.

First published July 2020

Considering Cultural Intelligence

Miriam Blackburn
Practice Development Nurse

Last year I was invited to attend a taster session on Cultural Intelligence (CQ). Honestly, I had never heard the term before and had no idea what to expect. I showed up, clueless but curious. I did not think the day would have the impact it did.

The day was facilitated by an incredible woman who engaged the room and truly spoke with passion. I found the first part of the day very challenging on a personal level. Never had I truly considered what was meant by "culture" and ultimately, how do I define my culture. Needless to say, I struggled. I hear other people speaking about their culture, organisational culture, and youth culture for example – but to pick it apart, understand it and define it? I couldn't begin to articulate it.

I had not considered some things that are included in "culture" such as age differences, where we have worked, our hobbies and how we spend our time. These are aspects of who we are and how we behave, and how we can feel included or excluded based upon these.

As the day progressed, I gained some understanding of what is meant by culture and what can influence this. How our culture can influence our perceptions of other people's behaviour and also how we interact with each other or respond to certain feelings, such as grief. I am not alone in saying there were many light bulb moments for those of us who attended – many of them quite difficult.

I reflected throughout the day on how differences in culture impact on the world we live and work within. There are many situations I think back to and wonder if I would have behaved differently with the awareness I gained during the session. One example, on a low level, was my open door policy as a leader on a ward. I was absolutely sure this was the best way to let everyone know I was available, but if that is not the organisational culture you have come from, rather one of formal hierarchy, this may actually not be helpful at all and could feel quite uncomfortable. There are so many incidents and interactions I have since reflected on and wondered, what could I have done differently? This is with colleagues and patients alike. How I may have judged someone's reactions and behaviours based on my social norms, based on my culture.

I left the day holding on to some difficult reflections, a lot of realisations and importantly, feeling inspired. I wanted to come away and learn more, change my behaviour and my understanding of the people I work alongside. One day will not get me there, but being open, listening and learning every day will help.

Recently I have heard the experiences of BAME staff on a personal level, the impact of the inequalities and racism on individuals and the lasting effects this has had. I know as a white woman, I will never fully understand these experiences but I will always listen and support people to feel able to speak up and will keep being that ally that amplifies their voices and supports them to be heard. My increased knowledge of culture and how my culture fits into its broader context has given me the awareness to consider different elements of an individual and to have a fuller appreciation for our differences.

First published July 2020

Minority report: lessons from being in the racial minority

Lucy Heffron
Engagement and Organisational Development Practitioner

Attending my first Workforce Race Equality Network (WREN) meeting in January 2019, it was unbeknown to me that this would be the first time in my life I was the only white person in a room and acutely aware of the colour of my own skin.

At first I felt the need to justify my appearance at the meeting. Working in the Organisational Development Team I was able to talk about the engagement and development opportunities available to everyone at our Trust, many of which are under-represented by our Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) colleagues, and promote these to network members.

Internally I had been thinking about my own comfort (what network members' perceptions of me might be, why I was there and if I was essentially eavesdropping on this safe space to share experiences) above the actual purpose of the meeting.

Quickly it became apparent that my justification and concerns were misplaced. The meetings were (appropriately) not about me.

Since then, being a part of the WREN I have met incredible people from around the Trust who I may never have come into contact with otherwise, heard personal stories about experiences of racism and become very aware of my own privilege and what that has meant for me as I've gone through life.

Reflecting on my attendance at the initial meetings and the mild discomfort I felt, it brings to mind how, following the murder of George Floyd in America, our race discussions have become more open and honest than ever before. As part of this we spent time discussing the vital involvement of white people in conversations about race, but how they may often feel uncomfortable taking part.

What resonated was that yes, it may feel uncomfortable. But that is fine. The comfort of white people is not more important than the safety and humanity of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people. Our BAME colleagues, friends and family members move through a world that can be hostile towards them every day and as we have seen in events across the globe, cause real harm. Experiencing discrimination will always be more uncomfortable than a white person taking part in a conversation about race.

So what have I learned?

- First and foremost; listen. As a white person, de-centralise yourself from the conversation and develop informed views by seeking to understand others
- Get used to being uncomfortable
- Work to diversify your own experiences. There are so many ways to educate yourself and start using your voice and actions for good. One of these first steps might be to join the WREN!

I would challenge anyone to listen to the first-hand accounts of experiences of racism, the full range of feelings it brings, and not to start to see the world differently. It has shifted my point of view entirely.

The WREN at Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust is open to all staff members and my call to other colleagues who are not from a marginalised group would be to join it too. Push for change, keep it on the agenda and play your part in creating positive change.

First published July 2020

My complicated relationship with my British heritage

Dr Huma Khan
Core Trainee Doctor

"A just society is that society in which ascending sense of reverence and descending sense of contempt is dissolved into the creation of a compassionate society."
- **B.R. Ambedkar**

The South Asian Heritage Month (SAHM) was initiated this year and it runs from 18 July to 17 August with the purposes of commemorating and celebrating South Asian heritage and cultures within the context of their contemporary and historical relationship with the United Kingdom.

The socio-political discourse of two distinct geographical areas on a map, namely, the UK and South Asia have forced individuals, groups and entire nations to consider the issue of identity at various points in history – I certainly am no exception to this query of "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" Unfortunately, just by being born and nurtured in this country has not automatically afforded me the luxury of confidently claiming to be "British", without being challenged. Compartmentalising and categorising my existence exclusively to a British or Pakistani framework is an impossible and an unfair ask. The truth, and perhaps the essence of my identity, is somewhere in between and thus both must be acknowledged.

The celebration of my heritage does not merely start in Balochistan or Punjab, where my parents were born. Rather, it starts long before the British colonised India, where my ancestry lies. The Indian subcontinent was the epicentre of one of the oldest civilisations in the world, the Indus Valley. The region has rich tradition in the fields of language, literature, music and contributions to the earth, basic, medical and social sciences. Similarly, my complicated relationship with my British heritage is a direct result of the colonisation of my ancestral home and its aftermath.

The British rule over India lasted over two hundred years and ended with the Partition of India and formation of East (present day Bangladesh) and West Pakistan. The Partition is one of the biggest mass migrations in world history, which left one million dead and over twelve million people displaced. The contributions, albeit non-consensual and enforced, of British India to the Crown have been great. India provided raw materials to Britain that were used to flood the world market and thus providing an astronomical amount of wealth to Britain whilst concurrently destabilising the Indian economy. Economists believe had the region not suffered this economic setback at the time of independence, the region's economy would not be in the dire state it is today. The native manpower also provided a backbone for the British army and saw the largest contributions from India to both the world war efforts.

Following British withdrawal from its colonies and the aftermath of WW2, the UK had a severe labour shortage and thus encouraged economic migration and promised British citizenship to those from Commonwealth nations.

As my forefathers joined other immigrants to work in various British sectors, they faced racial discrimination and violence. My parents were told on many occasions to "go back to where you came from", whilst my school contemporaries found it acceptable to scribble in my workbook "dirty paki". The shame I felt for being brown, dressing differently and speaking languages other than English led to anxiety and a withdrawal during core schooling years. Unfortunately, these experiences are not unique to my situation. Countless young individuals unnecessarily hated and repressed a rich, beautiful and vibrant heritage during their formative years. The generation who migrated felt the brunt of the othering process, whilst another generation stands here today perhaps questioning why home does not feel like home at times? What are we? Who are we? If not here, where do we and to whom do we belong?

Prejudice and discrimination remain insidiously embedded in British society and can be found in housing, education, health access and job recruitment, retention and promotion. A recent YouGov poll reports that two thirds of Black Britons experienced racial slurs; three quarters had been asked "Where are you REALLY from?" and half believed their career development had been hindered. The Lammy, Timpson and McGregor-Smith Reviews identified and provided scrutiny of the practices that need review and reform with relation to racial disparities within the criminal justice system, school exclusion and directly relevant to us, race in the workplace.

Whilst the SAHM provides a rightful platform of celebrating the South Asian diaspora's heritage and contribution to British Society, it must also become a platform recognising the sacrifices, losses and pain which were woven into narratives through the historical association with the British Empire. As individuals and institutions, we must strive for diversity, equality and true inclusivity in order to create not only a just workspace but a just society for the generations to come. By no means an easy path but most certainly one to celebrate.

First published July 2020

Race in the workplace

Sajimon Madathil
Clinical Lead for Bank Staffing

I still remember the day I landed in London some 16 years ago and boarded a coach to Leeds, to start my nursing degree at Leeds Metropolitan University. I sometimes reminisce about my journey on the bus as it sped up the M1. It was a new world – new people, sights, sounds and structures, and I was dreaming of a bright future. I was a mature student with a first degree, having spent several years voluntary working in Catholic missions in East Africa teaching in schools and working with youth. Nursing certainly was a career change but still supporting people in need, something I really enjoyed doing. I was very far away from home – Kerala, the land of coconut palms at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. An Asian cabbie drove me from Leeds bus station to my hall of residence in Headingley. On the way I had a quick glance at my university and noted several Indian takeaways along Hyde Park. Mary Morris International residence had students from all over the world and I spent a comfortable first night – I made it but this was only the first step of my new journey!

Three long years of nurse training was quite an experience! I enjoyed my training but experienced racism from some fellow students as well as patients. Identifying racism for what it was took me a while. I may have been naive, but I could not imagine people would behave like this. When you are a minority in a social space you feel small and often struggle to find a voice – you somehow conform and learn to know your place. Your self-confidence and sense of worth diminish, and sadly it affects your aspirations too. But it was not all doom and gloom – I had tremendous support from many tutors, lasting friendship from fellow students and excellent mentoring from practice placements across Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. My first job as a mental health nurse was on Ward 3 at The Becklin Centre. I loved working there as colleagues were really supportive and soon we got one of the best managers I'd ever had, who transformed our team with his compassionate leadership. My wife, who is a general nurse from India, could not believe when I got my band 6 position on the ward in less than three years! This is significant when you know a lot of BAME nurses in the UK struggle to progress beyond band 5.

I enjoyed supporting our service users, mentoring student nurses, providing leadership on the ward and gained some management skills along the way. I was delayed discharges co-ordinator on the ward and attended meetings with senior managers – presenting cases on my ward. Slowly I began to see the bigger picture of the complexities and inter-dependencies between health and social care provision, role of an integrated care pathway and the need for working across organisations to bring the best outcome for our service users. Attending band 6 forums provided a great opportunity to network with peers and contribute to practice development. My curiosity about determinants of health and wellbeing led me to pursue a master's in public health at the University of Leeds during this period, supported by the Trust.

Four years into my band 6 post, I was seconded to the ward manager position on Ward 5 at The Newsam Centre and later gained a permanent team manager position at the Treatment Unit back at Becklin. I then worked as interim ward manager on Ward 2 at The Mount for nearly a year before gaining my current post within the workforce directorate as Clinical Lead for Bank Staffing. I love this job where I can influence how bank staff are viewed and treated across the Trust. The majority of bank staff are from BAME backgrounds and a good percentage within this group have South-East Asian heritage. Bank forums have been successful in giving a voice to this dispersed yet vital staff group, who currently make up about 30% of the workforce at the Trust. The Trust Board and our CEO support and attend these forums. Bank staff were included in the Trust Staff Survey last year for the first time. There's now career progression for bank staff where they can be fast-tracked into substantive positions without another interview. It was a proud yet humbling moment when I received the first Trust Award for Equality and Inclusion last year in recognition of my work with our bank staff. We still have a long way to go. Culture change takes time and sustained effort from all parties involved.

If we are honest about the equality and diversity agenda, we need to see more colour at the snowy white peak of our organisation. We need role models up there who are keen to inspire and support others. There are many talented BAME staff at the Trust who need to get all the support and encouragement they can if they are to progress. Having BAME representation on interview panels is a good starting point but a policy statement on career progression will provide greater transparency and accountability amidst concerns about cherry picking best fits and side-lining experienced and skilled BAME staff. Minority staff face many disadvantages, both systemic and personal. It's a shame that many experienced and skilled staff remain at entry level in their professions whilst young white graduates climb up the career ladder, making them wonder 'what is it that I am lacking here?'

Many minority staff spend years collecting certificates but struggle to get a promotion. Some develop anxiety and stress and give up hope altogether. Like me, for many, English is not their first language. Although their written language can be very good, many find spoken English to be an issue – including fluency and even accent. The Trust can do more and extend the coaching offer to include interview coaching/preparation. Competition is tougher for higher jobs and interview preparation can be exhausting when you have competing priorities at home and work. The Trust is heading in the right direction, with an active Workforce Race Equality Network and BAME forum. Legislation and race equality standards can be empowering, but for me, real empowerment starts with allowing myself to accept that I am just as good as my white colleagues.

First published August 2020

Reaching out and connecting for National Inclusion Week

Caroline Bamford
Head of Diversity and Inclusion

Next week is National Inclusion Week with the focus on reaching out and connecting.

My view of inclusion is that it is about the systems of our organisation and the way it operates. It's about leadership which role models inclusive behaviours and development of a culture that enables and empowers everyone by making room for the needs of each of us. Essentially to achieve this, focus is needed to recognise and take action where there are both common and individual issues that need to be challenged and resolved.

Therefore in advance of National Inclusion Week I have been reflecting over this pandemic period about all the amazing people throughout the Trust who are working together to drive action and make change happen to improve the experience of everyone in these uncertain and ever changing times.

In particular, the pandemic has highlighted the inequalities experienced by our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) colleagues and also our disabled colleagues and service users. The power of connecting has really been highlighted by the many people who have openly shared their experiences of racism and discrimination first-hand and by their actions to influence positive change.

I personally have learned so much through other people sharing and connecting, particularly over the last seven months. At times I have found it challenging and conversations have made me review my thinking about my own culture and identity and how these influence my behaviours and perceptions. I may have "inclusion" in my job title but I am constantly learning from others and it doesn't mean I always get it right!

Therefore I believe that through encouraging each other to reach out, connect and taking time to have a conversation and learn from each other is a great way to celebrate National Inclusion Week.

Building an inclusive culture is about everyone, and we all have a part to play.

First published September 2020

If you can see it, you can be it

Sharon Prince
Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Head of Psychology and Psychotherapy Services

The first day of my second year placement in clinical psychology was eventful. I turned up excited about what lay ahead but anxious as I had never worked in this setting before. I had met my placement supervisor, white and female, the week before, and now I was due to meet her at a group home to attend a team meeting. I arrived at the home and was shown to the meeting room. My supervisor arrived a few minutes later and sat at the other end of the room as it was a little busy and cramped. As the chair of the meeting, she said hello to everyone and then turned to me and asked, 'are you the new health care assistant'….?

Fast forward many years later, I am now a Consultant Clinical Psychologist contributing to a meeting with senior figures working within mental health services. At the end of the session, I enter into a conversation with the white female chair, and she asks me by way of introduction whether I am the secretary of one of the invitees who sent their apologies.

I make no value judgement about being a health care assistant or secretary, my reflection is, why is it not assumed that I am the doctor, lawyer, psychologist, clinical director (insert any other profession here) within those contexts? Why is it that as a black woman it is often assumed that I am the person with the least amount of power in a room, usually filled with white people? These micro aggressions, as that is what I believe them to be, are a regular occurrence for people of colour. These are the everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory or negative attitudes towards stigmatized or culturally marginalised groups. We know that these behaviours along with systemic/institutional racism have a significant impact on wellbeing and life expectancy. We already know that this stuff kills us, and is one of the many issues which drive the Black Lives Matter movement.

Our children and members of our community need to know that they can inhabit any space they choose, but too often because of structures and processes over which we have very little control, they are prevented from achieving their potential. In my mind, this is one of the many reasons why we celebrate Black History Month; to celebrate the contributions and achievements of black people and to make visible what is often unseen, denied or denigrated. My message for everyone and especially people of colour reading this blog, is not to internalise those messages about being 'less', and to use your personal and relational resources to survive and thrive.

First published October 2020

My name is John, and I am a Muslim

John Brennan
CRISS Practitioner

I was not always a Muslim, I come from the south east of Ireland brought up a staunch Catholic feeling guilty for everything I had said and done.

I came to the UK in 1989, a time when being Irish was not ideal. The troubles had not yet finished and the mere hint of an accent could have repercussions. During this time the freedom I had from not being at home in Ireland meant that I could easily explore different cultures and religions, something I always had a fascination with. Don't get me wrong I still had insecurities from a cultural perspective, where it was believed and felt that the British were better than us and even more intelligent. Something I believe has been passed down from generation to generation, although it has to be said, not by everyone.

Along with the animosity I also felt accepted by a lot of people, especially in an environment where various colours and accents lived and worked together. I had a fascination for the "foreigner", their culture and experiences, their religion and especially their food. Over the years I have tried various religions as mine never sat right with me and I ensured my time spent practicing a particular religion educated me.

Of course my family thought I was going nuts, "oh here we go again which one are you today?" was often said to me. I felt that at times I was a religious schizophrenic. Throughout this time I had a lot of Muslim friends but never had the urge to explore the religion. Probably as throughout my various attempts at other religions, Jesus was always in my thoughts. To be honest I never saw Jesus as God, I never could comprehend the holy trinity three into one. I felt that like me, he was a social worker, except for me I was a social worker for a specific role, and his was for everyone (lol).

A friend of mine who is a Muslim and married to an Irish woman, so could not be all that bad, gave me a lovely present of a Quran. It had Arabic, English and the transliteration to be able to pronounce the prayers. It was also inscribed with the words "to a brother from another mother".

Over the next few years we had our debates and banter. We spoke about the various parts of both the Bible and the Quran that we felt were a bit dodgy but we had mutual respect. After a few years I actually started to read the Quran, and all the questions I had growing up in Ireland about religion and God appeared to be answered in the Quran. Also Jesus was in there, bonus! At first I thought it was only coincidence, but I got engrossed reading it. To be totally honest even at times when I could not be bothered to read it, or just fed up, I would pick up the Quran and randomly open to various pages. Upon reading the page it appeared to answer whatever I was going through at the time.

Moving on to the mid 2000s, a different era and different threats were happening not only in the UK but throughout the rest of the world. I decided to convert to Islam. My partner was upset at first as she is English and does not believe in religion, she thought I was too influenced by others. My family thought I was being brain washed, but I explained the reasons why and what I felt I was getting out of it. The change was for me, not for anyone else.

I suppose they felt that I would become what the media had portrayed, religion would take over my life and I would become this man who treats women as objects, but that did not stop me. Over time they saw a change in me and how I am within myself and they accepted it.

My friends and social network, now that's a different kettle of fish.

When my friends found out what I'd done the banter began, "Oh here he is, the muzzy is here!" Although they could not understand why I'd done it, they did in their own way accept it. The one thing you must understand is that I lived in a highly Irish populated community in Hertfordshire where everyone knows everyone. I have a lot of close friends and even though we rip each other we still protect each other, but you cannot be a sensitive soul around them in regards to colour, creed or religion as they will call you everything under the sun. But in a loving manner – yeah right.

The one thing about Irish humour is it's harsh, it does not hold back on its punches and the swearing is very intense, but I suppose with the accent it is very funny. I have been called "Rag Head", "Muzzy", "the Sheikh" and various other things but all in good jest.

One time me and a friend were at a darts match. As the night went on and people were getting more intoxicated, talk turned to foreigners taking over the country and taking jobs. Obviously as Irish we stood up for ourselves and one guy said, "Not your kind, it's the Pakis and the Blacks and bloody Muslims." At that point my friends said "you do realise he is a Muslim?" This guy looked at me and said "An Irish Paki Muslim? Are you a paedophile?" With that I stood up, but one of my friends grabbed him and took him outside. When my friend returned I told him that he did not have to do that. He looked at me and said "we're allowed to call you names, but that **** is not, anyway if I hit him I would only hurt him, but if you hit him you would kill him". He only said this as I am a triple black belt and he is one of my students.

To be honest since I converted to Islam, I have found a lot of people are more interested in why I converted rather than try to belittle my choice. What I do find funny is at times I have often been in situations where others did not know what I was, and as there were no other people of colour there they have often expressed their actual opinion on Muslims. Once it's pointed out to them their demeanour changes to "well not all of them are like that".

I don't get angry with people's opinions, god knows I have enough of my own, however I do see it as an opportunity to educate people on the reasons why I choose to be a Muslim. I tell everyone I am in no way the best example of a Muslim, I have more faults than most people, it's the individual message I get from Allah and his teachings rather than following the teaching of anyone else. If and when I am to be judged it will be by Allah and Allah alone can judge me, I will whole heartedly take whatever rewards or punishments are given.

I probably get more institutional racist remarks for being Irish than Muslim and I believe people think this is more acceptable because I'm white.

Thank you and goodbye. My name is John and I am Muslim but I am also Irish.

First published November 2020

The journey continues...

Dr Huma Khan
Core Trainee Doctor

"And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, in fact, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about."
- Murakami; Kafka on the Shore

As I try to configure appropriate words to reflect on this year gone by, I quickly realise that simply no phraseology, nomenclature of usage of any word in any way imaginable can do justice to what I, and perhaps every individual working in the Trust, feels. I sit here exhausted, broken and failing to make sense of the world outside and inside of my existence.

My thoughts scatter to the opening blog for the Workforce Race Equality Network (WREN) in April 2020, where I had a feeling of blunted dread and, perhaps, a premonition pertaining to the difficulties this pandemic would bring for us not only as a workforce, but also as a society. I believed that it would test our resolve, individually and collectively, but what I did not know was just how arduous or endless the test would be.

The pandemic performed precisely as it was expected to. It took the rifts of our society, where the vulnerable suffered the most in health, welfare, education and economic spheres, and it tore through to leave behind gaping empty spaces of inequality. Not only did minoritised and marginalised communities feel the direct brunt of the coronavirus associated morbidity and mortality, it also worsened issues that we were already struggling to deal with such as a dramatic rise in domestic violence, worsening poverty, furthered gaps in education, and adverse health outcomes for women and children from specific backgrounds.

The havens, sanctuaries and safe spaces that we held close to us also suffered; important festivals were cancelled, community and religious spaces closed down and we were left socially isolated from our loved ones for months. We were not able to mourn and grieve properly; we could not say goodbyes to our loved ones, we saw delayed funeral prayers and the lack of crucial spiritual final rites that gave meaning not only to those who passed on but also to those remaining behind without them. As a society we have not been able to mourn as we know how to. The pandemic took away the tactile aspects of mourning where families come together and hold each other in their arms. It took away any consolation, hope and solidarity that as humans we are so used to giving in the ways we know best during hardship.

To think that this alone was not struggle enough; the world witnessed the oppression of individuals and communities in a brazen and unapologetic manner across the globe through various mechanisms. Communities identifying with specific faiths, cultures and race felt isolated and alone under the various lens and filters of their respective oppression. So forgive me when I consider that most of 2020 alone has infected with wounds, pain and sorrow.

However, there is something else that I also muse upon and that is the ability of the tiniest glimmer of a fading candle, which is enough to light up the blackest clouds of darkness. The light that I speak of has not been an external source though. It has come from the kindness, compassion and care from the people working in this very Trust. It has come from us and for us.

Grief has a fantastic ability to convince us that we cannot get back up; it makes us question whether we can do the simplest things as before; it takes away a part of us and leaves behind a conviction etched in stone…that all is lost forever. It makes us question our role and purpose in our private lives but also in the service and care we provide for our patients and if it is indeed good enough.

As I navigated the murky waters of my own loss, people from this very Trust gathered around me and supported me in ways they knew how. Whilst they could not change my circumstances they made their position clear that they were there for me. Whether this was an email at a crucial time from Sara; David's regular phone calls just to ensure I was ok; Wendy's regular check-ins and WREN task-based therapy and Sharon's ongoing infinite amount of tea and time – they all played their part in ensuring this inexperienced junior doctor had some form of clarity and support in the most unclear and isolating of times. They have all given me insight into not only the type of doctor or leader I want to be, but the type of person I want to be in these roles.

Continuing this reflection of the people at Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (LYPFT), I have found hope and solace in the individuals who make up LYPFT – the staff on grass root levels. My colleagues in Older People's Community Mental Health Services who have continuously endured my rookie mistakes, my work family working in the North Wing who always have kept spirits high during the most difficult of times and the trainee doctors who have regularly messaged and checked up on me.

Any reflection and gratitude is incomplete without considering WREN, its members and their contributions. WREN has become the crux of wellbeing and a safe space for anyone wanting to join and be present in any capacity they can. Despite the challenges of this year, the network members came together to celebrate diversity and inclusion on every platform. WREN, individually and collectively, has supported its members in unlearning, learning and voicing our vulnerabilities through this process. It has been a platform where we have cried together, held each other and stood in solidarity together. Each and every member has done what they know best – supporting earnestly, endlessly and abundantly without seeking a return. Whilst the pandemic has taken so much from us and will most likely continue to take, the spirit of WREN members has consolidated my belief in resilience and that we WILL get through this. It has indeed made me proud to be affiliated with the Trust and call these people my colleagues and friends.

The journey continues, however, as we move forward not only must we reflect on the lessons of this year but we must also decide upon the values that will define us as not only as individuals but also as the organisation we represent. We may be different versions of our former selves through this year, it perhaps would be abnormal if we were not, however, the constant that should remain is the continuous process of togetherness, solidarity and finding allies in our colleagues for our causes.

The message, which remains the same as it was in my first blog, has to be one of equality, inclusion and rooted in collective humanity.

Now more so than ever.

First published December 2020

Building resilience through physical activity

Dr Vishal Sharma PhD
Knowledge and Evaluation Lead

"Your reasons to continue must be bigger than your reasons to quit."
– **Ross Edgley**, The Art of Resilience

My name is Vishal Sharma and I'm the Knowledge and Evaluation Lead within the Trust's Clinical Effectiveness Team. Knowing what to write for my blog post was tricky. So I decided to break down my learnings into three key areas, in the hope that it might encourage others to try something new.

- **Channelling your motivation**

  At the start of lockdown finding motivation was difficult; everything was different and uncertain, and engaging in the norm felt odd. So I initially turned to reading, and two books in particular – Ross Edgley's The Art of Resilience and David Goggins' Can't Hurt Me – provided an impetus for change. The idea of pushing your body past the limits imposed by yourself or others was intriguing, and gave me the motivation to see what I could achieve. The books emphasised the physical and psychological (managing stress) benefits that come from exercise and that motivation needs to come from within – you exercise for the sake of exercise, not for some external reward. I felt this would be a useful skill to develop for the future.

- **Finding an activity**

  I have, what might be considered, some unusual hobbies – archery and knife/axe throwing, as well as the more common running and going to the gym. Over the years I have learnt that the key is to find activities you enjoy and that encourage you to keep active. So I set myself challenges, small ones at first to build momentum, such as shooting 30 arrows per day, or running 5k three times a week. I tracked my progress and over the months the challenges increased in difficulty, to the point where in November I ran 5k every day and in December I set myself the challenge of running 300km over the month. In fact in December I ended up running 300km and walking a further 200km. Each challenge built on the learnings from the books and from my experience, and each encouraged me to push myself a little more – building that mental and physical strength.

- **Getting support**

  Even though internal motivation is key, having support from colleagues and friends can prove just as important. In November, the Trust had its activity challenge, which I entered with Alice Stoba, and we provided support to each other to keep us on track to win the team challenge. In December, I entered the stepping challenge, organised by Emma Brookshaw, and the support and friendly competition within the WhatsApp group encouraged me to keep going. In fact it was a conversation with Emma that motivated me to reach the 200km walking target on the last day. Sharing my goals and progress on Twitter with the @LypftRunners community kept me accountable and it seems it also encouraged others to start doing more physical activity.

We are fortunate to work in a Trust where everyone supports one another, and I've been lucky to make new friends across the Trust; something I never thought would happen when I started my first challenge all those months ago.

First published January 2021

Hope at such a time like this!

Abimbola Wilson
Research Assistant and Vice Chair of the Workforce Race Equality Network (WREN)

A time like this, full of uncertainties, where we've watched COVID rip apart families, economies, jobs, education, health systems, lifestyles, communities and essentially all we know to be "normal". Suddenly the most powerful nations of the world are powerless; the wise become fools and the strongest appeared weak. It's made a ridicule of wealth and riches. No race, age, nor status was spared. It has managed to affect everyone in one way or the other. It refocused us back to things that truly matter the most: love, humanity, care, empathy, compassion and "hope". In the midst of all the chaos, worries, pain, exhaustion, frustration, anxiety and uncertainty – one thing that has remained unchanging is the position of "hope".

I began to ponder more on the concept of hope. The more I pondered on it the more I began to appreciate what we have freely in it, irrespective of one's background, status, race, sexuality, ability or inability.

The past year has thrown a lot on us, not just as individuals, families, and organisations but as a nation. There has been a lot of attention on racial injustices and unlawful killings around the world, chaos within the education system. One thing that has remained constant is how we are holding on to hope, knowingly or unknowingly. In unprecedented and difficult situations, we somehow turn to hope. There is something about it that helps us to get by. By this I don't mean that there is an immediate change in whatever situation we are dealing with, but hope has a way of helping us to endure hard times until an outcome is reached (whatever that turns out to be).

For those whose loved ones are fighting for their lives from COVID-19, hope is what they have to hold on to. They can only hope that their loved ones will make it alive. Even when things do not go as they had hoped, hope is what they turn to again at the time of their loss, hoping that their loved one will find peace and rest; that those left behind will be safe and be strong together.

For all the amazing individuals who have put their lives on the line for others, they are hoping there will be an end to the terrible reign of the virus – hoping they can do the job they love without having to deal with the constant anxiety of what they might contract and take back home to their loved ones. For the managers, they are hoping that those they manage will be safe and well, when colleagues are tired and morale is low – they hope to be able to find the right words to encourage and reassure their staff.

Whatever the circumstance, I believe that there is hope available to help us get through. We can always reach out for it. Even at the darkest moments of our lives, when nothing seems to be working or making any sense, even when we don't feel like it, when everything else seems to fail, in those moments, there is still "HOPE".

Although, hope is sometimes used in a very casual way but at "such a time like this" when the sense of hopelessness is touching everything around us, it is important for us to remind ourselves the place of hope in humanity and in living. There will always be tough and difficult times – if it's not COVID, it will be something else and so the question is what do we have in such moments? Well, we have hope. Even when we feel too overwhelmed to sense it, it's always there.

I am an African, like many of us these times have been very difficult for me and my family. We have close relatives back in Africa and there have been many overwhelming moments of fear and anxiety, worries about what havoc COVID-19 could cause over there. We have worries about something terrible happening to any of our loved ones or to us during this period, concerns we might not be able to see them, touch them or worse be able to pay last respects in case the worst happened. There is a feeling of helplessness around those thoughts but I know that there is something to hang on to and it is hope.

Well, I know this has been a very difficult, stressful and very challenging time for us all. I might not know what your exact circumstance is or what is giving you that sense of hopelessness. I can only encourage you to breathe again and reach deep down. There is a way out of hopelessness into hopefulness – be encouraged and reach out to HOPE.

The vaccine offers hope out of this pandemic. I have had my first dose and when I get invited for the second dose, I will go and get it.

Let us keep looking out for each other, caring and supporting each other, showing empathy, compassion, love and consideration for one another and let us hope that one day we will all find the answer we are looking for.

I have hope that things will get better.

First published February 2021

Reflections on the women that make up our Trust

Wendy Tangen
Clinical Services, Inclusion Lead

Maya Angelou once said: "You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure." I am sure these words resonate with many as they do with me.

In recent weeks we have been hearing the sad news of violence against women. The Reclaim the Night Movement started back in 1977 during the Yorkshire Ripper murders where women were encouraged to stay indoors. More than forty years later and women are still being asked to change their behaviours as a result of violent crimes perpetrated by some men against them. What are the messages we would like to leave for our next generations? How are we as women within our intersectionalities becoming role models that challenge today's society and don't take the easy option of conforming as we are often expected to? And how do we move forward with the utmost respect and dignity for ourselves and each other, knowing this is not always easy? Questions I often ask myself again and again but I did not have to look very far for the answers, they were staring me right in the face, as I reflected on the strong women that surrounded me every day.

In celebration of International Women's Day (IWD) earlier this month I want to take the opportunity to share my reflections over the past year on what it means to me to celebrate and be amongst great women at Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (LYPFT). The theme of IWD this year is 'Choose To Challenge' and as the Chair of our Workforce Race Equality Network (WREN) my admiration for the women, my sisters in our network for their leadership and lived experiences to 'challenge' is astounding…words escape me.

As a network in the last year we decided we needed to come together to offer comfort to each other through what was and still is one of the most trying times in all of our lives. The pandemic has ripped through our hearts in the most horrendous way, leaving our vulnerabilities exposed as we were forced to be disconnected from our families, our communities and our loved ones. Our intentions were to just sit in each other's company and be there for each other, but what unfolded as the year progressed was so beautiful, for me it was like looking at a flower blossom and then being filled with the joy and happiness it brought. Women in our network, regardless of backgrounds, status or profession, began to reach out to each other, sharing their personal experiences of pain and grief and in so doing began to mend.

The solidarity formed created a strong bond which then saw some of the biggest hurdles being shifted. Topics of identities became the forefront of our conversations. We were holding open, honest, complex discussions particularly around discriminations, inequalities and valuing each other, allowing for transparency and trust, and creating a psychologically safe space for everyone to ask uncensored questions, support new learning and nurture compassion. This journey was not easy and often I heard apologies and permission indirectly being sought before attempting down a controversial lane, but what was amazing was our sisters immediately picking up on this and giving feedback to empower each other to be their authentic selves. We are not there yet. But our journey together has begun. There is much work to do to grant women the equality to value their many roles, appreciate their wisdom and embrace them for the amazing human beings that they are.

There will be times when we may need to stop and take a breath, but knowing we have each other will make the long road ahead less arduous. The role modelling and bravery displayed by these women despite their grief of losing family and community members, their moments of loneliness, isolation and fear of the unknown, to still give of themselves selflessly, to elevate each other, to challenge the status quo and to take action continued beyond network meetings will be the catalyst that embraces and builds positive cultures.

So I ask myself what is it like to be a woman in my organisation, how we support others to be their best selves and what have I learnt from the women in our network. Well, being a woman in leadership in LYPFT has become easier over the past years, sitting around the table and having a voice, but most importantly believing in my voice is one of my greatest achievements. But this came from the different layers of women leaders at LYPFT and our network, not forgetting male allies who also believe in us. I am bursting with pride to be amongst these strong, beautiful WOMEN and to be able to call them my sisters and to know we are always standing shoulder to shoulder shining brightly together.

First published March 2021

Being a Muslim during Covid-19 - Ramadan, vaccination and the importance of health

Siphelile Williams
Registered Learning Disability Nurse

Bismillahi ar-arkhamni ar-rakhim (In the name of Allah (God) the most Merciful the most Beneficent)

Surah Al-Baqar, Verse 183 says, "O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard (against evil)". For me, it is an obligation I should follow. Islam is a religion and a way of life I have chosen – a religion that gives me a balance between worldly life and hereafter, and the religion that encourages me to engage in life and help others.

Fasting is a major part of the month of Ramadan. However, Ramadan is also the month of peace, the month of tranquility, the month of cure, the month of goodness, the month of forgiveness, the month of mercy, the month of attaining paradise, the month of the Qur'an, the month of revelation, and the month of celebration of being a Muslim, where we practise self-restraint.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is reported to have said in His hadith that:

"Whoever fasted in Ramadan out of sincere Faith (i.e. belief) and hoping for a reward from Allah, then all his past sins will be forgiven..." (Bukhari)

From this hadith, I am reminded that Ramadan is a month of forgiveness and blessings, and observing fast makes me realise the blessings I have been granted and reminds me to be thankful to Allah for those blessings. Therefore, as a practising Muslim woman, it is even more important to be able to observe fast during this month of Ramadan. Abstaining from food and fluid intake from dawn until sunset whilst working is a huge challenge, and is even worse during these most challenging times where we must wear protective equipment due to the pandemic we are currently facing.

Fasting also makes one aware of those less fortunate and it reminds one to always help others. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said "Whoever helps his brother in his time of need, Allah will be there in his time of need" (Saheeh Muslim).

I see myself as a resilient person following my difficult experiences growing up as an orphan under difficult circumstances in Zimbabwe. This experience brought out an ability to navigate through life challenges and also equipped me with skills that I have transferred to nursing such as being empathetic, listening, and effective communication.

Islam also attaches great importance to health, so taking good care of one's own health is a religious duty. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) not only did he instruct people to take medicine, but he himself invited expert physicians for this purpose. With this in mind, I have had my vaccine as part of my religious practices, to look after my own health and as part of my profession to contribute to the promotion of health, and prevention of ill health.

As we all know Covid-19 has negatively affected individuals from ethnic minority groups, and I took it upon myself as a Muslim woman and a nurse from an ethnic minority group to advocate and encourage my friends and relatives to take the vaccine. During my redeployment to the Vaccination Hub, I took the opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of taking the vaccine with my colleagues from ethnic minority groups and Muslim communities. It has been extremely rewarding and satisfying to have been involved in activities that uphold the nursing standards which also incorporate my cultural upbringing and religious beliefs.

Nursing regularly tests resilience, stamina, and resolve – all of which I feel I possess to deliver care to patients successfully. However, my African heritage can be a barrier for some patients and those who do not understand my culture. All the same, I try by offering reassurance and sharing about myself to allay their anxieties.

The Qur'an and teachings of Muhammad (PBUH) teaches that all people regardless of their origin, are equal and that people should be fair with each other to help achieve a balanced and harmonious society. The Qur'an also states that, "Allah (God) does not forbid you from showing kindness and dealing justly…", Qur'an 60:8.

Let us continue supporting each other through promoting good health and recognising our differences. Despite the negatives that Covid-19 has brought, let us also remember that it has brought us together and made us realise the importance of togetherness and promoting good health.

First published April 2021

My identity as a Muslim Doctor

Dr Nazish Hashmi
Consultant Psychiatrist

First published May 2021

It is well known that religious identity emerges in social and historical context with a variable development. In the 21st century and the ever-evolving globalized world, the word identity has taken on a whole new meaning and more and more people are grappling with the concept of personal identity.

When I think about my identity, firstly I identify as a human who is to do no harm to any living thing, secondly as a Muslim, and thirdly as a mother. Being a female British/Pakistani, a wife/daughter/sister/a doctor all come somewhere down the list. In essence we all carry multiple identities and implement these in our day to day lives. For me, being a Muslim shapes my philosophy of life. Over the years I have moved from an ascribed Muslim identity to one that is chosen and declared. Being a doctor makes me proud as I am able to help so many but it also makes me even more aware of the ethos of justice and personal accountability. Below is an example of guidance given by Islam which if adhered to makes one a patient, resilient person with good manners.

"Encourage what is good and forbid what is evil, and endure patiently whatever befalls you. Surely this is a resolve to aspire to. And do not turn your nose up to people, nor walk pride fully upon the earth. Surely Allah does not like whoever is arrogant, boastful. And be moderate in your walking and lower your voice". Quran (chapter 31)

Britain has a large and growing Muslim population and people like me have a responsibility to explain Islam to the West. The aim is to see Islam as part of the solution and not part of the problem. I base this on the knowledge that Islam is a religion of optimism and in society we have a lot of inspirational individuals to make this positive impact. The idea to stay optimistic and help each other has been even more prevalent in times of the global pandemic. I always try to practise this optimistic approach but I am no angel and have days of frustration and anger like anyone else. I would like to believe that the way I cope with these is more altruistic and people around me would barely notice a difference. I have found solace in religion after small things like failing exams or bigger, like losing patients or personal bereavements. To me religion is a very big protective factor and I would be lost without it – particularly being in lockdown! There is only so much Netflix one can watch!

I have been passionate about supporting people from diverse backgrounds (colleagues and patients) and have been lucky enough to work in a team recently that supports inclusion and equality by providing extra support and training to all team members. My passion is derived from Prophet Mohammed emphasising the issue of diversity, inclusion and equality, based on the teachings of the Quran. 1400 years ago in his farewell pilgrimage he said the following words:

"An Arab has no superiority over a non Arab, nor a non Arab has any superiority over an Arab. Also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white, except by piety and good deeds".

Delayed dreams and a Pandemic

Dr Miriam Isaac
Consultant Psychiatrist

What's the fuss all about?
People often wonder of those who live abroad
But hardly do they ever share
What it really feels deep inside
A stranger on both sides as time goes by

This virus, am sure has taught a thing or two
Maybe it has revealed the painful gaps too
Of those to have and have not
Of those who can and cannot

The lands open up for all who is in
Yet a migrant is at the mercy of those who rule within
Can they be let in or are they out?
Does any one realise what's that all about

Peace of mind neither there nor here
Uncertain times we patiently adhere
In waves this virus rise and fall
Along with it our hopes and fears

One thing that is true no matter what
Is the harsh truth that we have lost a lot
How many more before we say enough?
How many years should we wait just to give a hug?

I hope we see an awakening
Not just as a nations but as human beings
May we all get to see better days, I pray
Amidst the fear, loss, angst and dismay
Our dreams cant be stopped, they are just delayed
Let's hold on to that hope for today.

First published May 2021

Born in Huddersfield

Dr Nuwan Dissanayaka
Consultant Psychiatrist

I was born in a Huddersfield bedsit. Well, to be precise, I was born in the Infirmary across the road and upon my arrival I was well looked after as my mum worked there as a theatre nurse. She was one of thousands of ex-colonials enticed over to sixties Britain with the promise of a brighter future – doing the jobs no one here wanted to do! My parents' love story is for them to tell but, in short, my dad abandoned his destiny as the heir to a thriving family business to set sail for England and attempt to win her hand. Luckily for me, he succeeded.

Like most immigrants, my folks are grafters. As a textile student at the local Polytechnic my dad literally gave himself a hernia with the backbreaking labour he took on. At weekends I had to keep the noise down so as not to disturb my mum's sleep after her never-ending nightshifts. Money was tight as they squirreled away most of their pay for private school. Their cultural ethos of hard work was coupled with the unshakeable belief that education is the key to success. Their example matched their advice – if you have Brown skin you have to work twice as hard to succeed.

My parents both faced discrimination but their responses couldn't have been more different. My dad, ever the Buddhist, practised acceptance despite repeated racial injustices but my mum was far less forgiving. Aged one she recounts that a young man approached my pram and spat in my face. She chased him down; an instinctive but risky response for a Brown woman in the early seventies. Thankfully, I've no memory of that incident but, as a small child, I do remember her courage facing down racist thugs who spat on our car (why do racists spit so much?) and taunted us in the street. Resilience is an overused word but my folks have it in spades and my admiration for them is immeasurable.

I have no ancestral memory. Living five and a half thousand miles away, my grandparents were strangers to me. Their lives were mythical stories set long ago in an ancient land and narrated in a foreign tongue. I'd like to say that I was curious about my roots growing up but I'm afraid I wasn't. At a time when our institutions didn't even pretend to care, assimilation was the best survival strategy. From the jackbooted National Front enthusiastically "Paki bashing" on our streets with apparent impunity from the police, to teachers mimicking the racist tropes of the "comedy" show Mind Your Language, being proud to be Brown didn't feel like an option, especially at a school with an affluent White majority. So I shunned my heritage and put as much distance as possible between me and community gatherings, my religion and even the amazing food which I love so much today.

It was at medical school that I started to rediscover my culture. In a North East city with less Brown people there seemed to be less racial division. The overt racism paradoxically reduced, liberating me from the limiting philosophy of my school. My circle of friends consisted not of middle class students ostentatiously slumming it but instead the people I worked with in a local bar. With them I felt more comfortable in my skin and even overcame my aversion to "going for a curry". Societal attitudes were changing or at least that's how it seemed and I finally had a safe space in which to embrace the beauty of my origins. Indeed the only scenario that episodically shattered this illusion was the way White men reacted to me being out in public with a White girlfriend. Take it from me; it is no accident that this theme features on racial discrimination questionnaires…

I have three kids of mixed heritage and I hope things will be better for them. But in my younger boy's first weeks at primary school an older child stopped him from entering a Wendy house because he was "too brown". And more recently my older boy was sledged at cricket with Islamophobic slurs by jealous adults whose asses he was whupping. So, I'm taking no chances. I've told them this cautionary tale and they know that, at least for now, they too should expect to work twice as hard if they are to succeed in life.

This blog is about identity but you'll notice I haven't yet shared my ethnicity. The reason is that if you can identify with any of what I've said, then we share something important and, if this has touched you in any other way, then you could be an ally. And, in our fight together against racism, this matters more than the fact that my folks came here from…Sri Lanka.

First published July 2021

My experiences growing up mixed race in the UK

Maxine Brook
Digital Change and Systems Team

There is a lot of stigma that we "don't have it as bad as America", and whilst there may be elements of truth to that bold and rash statement, I would hopefully like to shed some light on this from my personal experience.

I cannot speak for the experiences of all black people in the UK, as I am mixed race/biracial. I have a light/medium complexion, which I understand equates to privilege. This is often referred to as "colourism" – discrimination based on skin colour and a form of prejudice or discrimination usually from members of the same race in which people are treated differently based on the social implications from cultural meanings attached to skin colour. I think in itself, 'colourism' is a complex issue that not everyone always understands. People tend to think that racial issues are simpler and more black and white.

Being mixed raced/biracial I have experienced a lot of varied discrimination from both white people and black people. Growing up I didn't always feel accepted in either race and sometimes this was extremely confusing. In addition to having a mixed race identity, there are many more social and environmental factors that amount to a mixed race experience. For example, I am half white British and half Jamaican. I grew up with both of my parents in a two parent household. I also grew up in Bradford West Yorkshire, so my experience of childhood will be very different to a mixed race woman who grew up in London (for example).

I went to two very different schools. One was a very deprived primary school in which not many children received acceptable SATs scores and were to struggle in secondary school. Then my secondary school was a catholic school with very high standards and extremely strict. These experiences shaped me; I had learnt how to navigate in different social circles.

In primary school I was the only BAME child in my whole school year. In secondary school there were around six other black or biracial boys and girls, around 20 Asian boys and girls and the rest of the school year were white boys and girls. I experienced a lot of racial slurs throughout my time in both schools and just learnt to 'take it on the chin'.

In secondary school someone actually said to me that "the slave trade was not racist, it was different times back then. People need to get over it and stop moaning as it was just white people thinking they were superior to black people".

I remember talking to my dad when I got home and he rang the school. He spoke with the head teacher and also the leader of 'ACAP'. This was the 'African Caribbean Achievement Project' that used to come in to school and take the BAME students out of our citizenship lesson to teach us a little about black history that we were not learning in the school curriculum. Unfortunately not much changed for the rest of my time in school and it was just the norm to accept this.

Throughout childhood and into my teens I experienced a lot of racism from family and family friends, both white and black people. For example, comments like: 'You're not a proper black woman, because you're only half', 'do you even understand how your dad speaks', nicknames like 'lightie' and some even got as disgusting as calling me a 'half breed' and many other derogatory names. These comments take me back to learning the 'Half-Caste Poem' by John Agard. It rings a lot of truth.

This I have to say has been the hardest and most difficult situation to deal with as this is a lot more personal. I think with outside people you build a wall and you can take so much more but when it comes from your inner circle not accepting you because you are biracial it's the hardest hit on your self-esteem. For me personally this affected me a lot.

One of my most distinct memories of my childhood is that I had learned to hate my natural hair at a very young age; it was always a struggle every morning. I used to buy clip-ins of colourful or blonde hair for my dolls and put them in my own hair. I would swish it around as if I had long straight hair. I envied my white classmates for their beautiful hair. I cried to my mum many times to relax my curly hair but she refused, telling me my hair was beautiful. In early adulthood I taught myself how to do hair extensions and weaves. I would do these so much that my mum and dad would moan that they never saw my natural hair anymore. But I felt better and more accepted with straight hair and extensions rather than my natural hair. People would comment and pat your curly hair and it made you feel like a pet. With straight hair you just got complimented on how grown up you looked.

Now I'm writing this as a 31-year-old woman who has over time learnt to embrace and accept not only her natural hair but all that comes with my entire heritage. I have learnt that I don't need to put up with racism and that I have a voice to help change and educate people where I can. I was the first in my family to graduate with a BA Hons Degree and every little step like this gave me more and more confidence.

I have learnt so much from people around me and my parents about how to deal with situations and issues in appropriate ways. I have grown so much from the situations I've faced and I continue to keep learning and teaching. I am so grateful that my parents always had my back; I could not be here without them.

I have used my experiences and knowledge to drive me in my working life and help give me focus to improve working environments via BAME staff networks. I have been involved in writing zero tolerance racism polices and working towards reducing unconscious bias in recruitment processes in previous roles. I will continue to be involved where I can in any projects that improve and breed a more accepting culture for everyone.

It's not been an easy road and that's okay because without all these experiences I wouldn't be who I am today.

First published August 2021

Growing up as a Muslim after 9/11

Dr Huma Khan
Core Trainee Doctor

Tuesday 11 September 2001. This date is etched in the memories of people across the world. It is associated with grief, loss, and anger. Some losses have been more than others. Unimaginably so. A lot has been said of this date, the sequence of events following it and most certainly, about its aftermath.

My brother, then aged 11 years and I, at 12 years came back from school on this date to find my mother silently staring at the flashing images of the World Trade Centre on our television screen. I do not think anybody who witnessed that day has been untouched or unaffected by it. Everyone has had consequences. So, when the proposed actions regarding Afghanistan were announced and the subsequent events unfolded, I found myself numb as I tried to find clarity in my thoughts and emotions.

There remains a percentage of the population, identifying with the Islamic faith, who remember what it was like to be a Muslim before 9/11 and the War on Terror. However, this hard comparison of a life before and after as a Muslim remains an untouched and unexplored territory for hundreds and thousands of young people who identify or are linked with the Islamic faith in some way or other. During the key years when one embarks on the journey of approaching adulthood, questioning their identities and positionality – many were questioned, suspected or even convicted by their friends, neighbours and generally society at large for being the oppressor. Poorly disguised under the façade of camaraderie and banter were insults of "suicide bomber" or "terrorist" thrown across playgrounds and common rooms.

I have no idea what it was like to be a Muslim before the War on Terror and I never will. Every time I fill out a form that collects my demographic data, I am reminded that I am simply not British. That there is a difference between British – White and British – Pakistani. When filling out the faith section of the questionnaire, I stare long and hard at "Muslim", and wonder if the question seeks to ask my definition of this word or if it asks whether I am the one to watch out for. Clumsily, awkwardly and guiltily, I have often clicked "prefer not to say".

The events of 9/11, the subsequent war and the deeply entrenched issue of Islamophobia are not independent issues but interconnected. It has not affected only my childhood and growth into adulthood but also tainted innocent universal experiences with anxiety and fear.

I remember the pangs of anxiety every time I carried out a literature search for a project regarding mental health in conflict in case I am pinged for surveillance. Whilst leading the focus group for WREN's Islamophobia Awareness Month, I remember Muslim colleagues refusing to take part or have minimal interaction as they did not wish to draw attention to themselves or "not wanting trouble".

I remember carrying out an internet search for smaller unknown mosques where my friends could offer Friday prayers in Pakistan without risking an attack. I remember my mother's voice describing my uncle's injuries after a rogue metal shrapnel found its way through his car window in an attack. Yesterday I told my friend living in Delhi to not go for a walk after hours given that it might be unsafe for a young Muslim to be out and about during that time.

The last twenty years of my life have made it impossible to be on one side of the Us vs Them rhetoric. My positionality and debates on war, borders and conflict have usually ended up with someone questioning, "So you agree with terrorists just bombing people, then?"

The withdrawal of foreign intervention in Afghanistan was never going to be easy. Not for veterans, their families or anyone else who has lost someone or part of themselves during this conflict. The end of the occupation of Afghanistan calls for reflection from each one of us – individuals, communities, and organisations. The "refugee problem", aside from being derogatory and condescending, feebly attempts to absolve responsibility from the conflict and crises of "foreigners", which is heavily interlinked with foreign policies that extend decades before the war in Afghanistan.

Regardless of our respective journeys over the last twenty years, our identities, and our socio-political stances – as mental health professionals, but more importantly, as humans there is an urgent and dire need of reflection and introspection of our values. For me, it starts with the recognition of my privilege and positionality. Regardless of the difficulties that I have cited above in my own existential crisis, it does not take away the fact that I have lived in a country that is safe, a place where I have built a life and a place that I call home, where I have the freedom to speak up about my thoughts and curate such spaces. I have the confidence and a sense of safety in speaking out against what I deem to be oppression. If there is anything that I lack, it is perhaps the guilt that should surround of having an opinion about people 3500 miles from me, in conflict, to whom the above luxuries are not available to. And quite frankly, having some complicity in the state that they are in by the very virtue of the civil rights and luxuries I have just described.

Whilst the occupation in Afghanistan has come to an end, the same cannot be said about the trauma and its toll upon the mental health of countless groups who have suffered and lost. As mental health practitioners, this toll will find us as we help our veterans, victims and survivors of this war.

As much as this article has reflected my personal journey and offered a rudimentary critique of the difficulties surrounding recent events, I wish to remain optimistic and hopeful for the future. An important place to begin, therefore, is with gratitude to the dedicated, compassionate and caring staff members in this Trust and the wider NHS, for whom home was once a place far away with its respective conflicts and difficulties.

First published September 2021

Diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Sifiso Nare
Care Coordinator

To mark Black History Month, the timing felt right for me to write a blog on the two main issues that I consider pertinent in multicultural Britain.

The cold wintry January was to mark the start of a new chapter in my life, as I arrived in Britain.

I had no idea where the wheel of fate was going to take me.

Like most immigrants, I had already completed tertiary education in my home country and when it was time to pursue a career pathway, naivety made me think that I could easily land a job in my area of expertise.

As I embarked into the journey of career pursuit, it dawned on me that the arrow of the wheel of fortune was not going to be pointing my way anytime soon. This is sadly the case for most foreigners who come here already qualified in different disciplines.

The solution to my pursuit was right before my eyes as when I scanned around I realised that for most immigrants, nursing was a field which many had embraced as that is where a job was guaranteed post qualification.

Like many, I wasted no time and undertook training in mental health nursing. I also had other personal reasons why I chose mental health nursing.

The nurse training was a great opportunity for me to assimilate and integrate into a new culture. One of the things that I was quick to realise or learn was that if you were not happy about something or someone, directly approaching them to inform them about your feelings was considered rude, confrontational or even aggressive. I realised a lot of people were confident to talk about people in their absence (maybe what I would term gossip) and then act like all was fine in their presence.

This was very different to how we would tackle things back home, where we believe that the best way will be to approach or inform that person so that they can know about your feelings and hope that this will then prompt a change of behaviour or attitude. I wonder if having this ingrained in us will be a factor in why most BAME staff are considered rude, confrontational or aggressive.

Fast forward to 2021, where I'm part of a team where I'm the only person that looks like me.

Yes, there is a colleague of the same ethnicity but because we have two very different roles and backgrounds, I consider myself the only one.

Teams pride themselves about inclusion or diversity but it's not only about being invited to the party, it's more than that; it's about feeling welcome to dance too.

Every section of humanity prides itself about that which belongs to them. Naturally people will gravitate to what they are accustomed to, looks like them or has similarities with them, even in terms of office banter and many other reasons.

I don't go to work to make friends and I'm fully aware that just like siblings we have no choice over who our work colleagues are.

Despite this realisation, I'm only human and at times yearn to speak to someone who would understand my concerns, frustrations and maybe should I add, accent too. I say accent as English is one language that is spoken in so many dialects. It is unfortunate that some use it as a measure of intelligence.

Does it mean a heart surgeon whose native language is German, Spanish, Greek etc cannot perform the procedure because they don't speak English or with a familiar accent?

The way native English speakers sound when they pronounce our names must be an answer as to why non-native speakers must never be ridiculed for how they sound when they speak English.

Foreign workers are being ridiculed or misunderstood at places of work because of the way they speak; accent discrimination is a reality at places of work.

How culturally intelligent are managers or those in influential positions?

It would be unfair for me to put everyone under the same umbrella as I have come across Caucasian people who are warm-hearted and inclusive, and the same is applicable to my current team too.

Most immigrants come here as first generation immigrants who then establish families. We do not have an extended family support system to assist us with childcare. Some managers are not inclusive when we have challenges with childcare. There are a lot of BAME parents who are trying to balance pursuing a career and raising kids. To preserve their own mental health they have no choice but to quit substantive roles to work on the bank or agency thereby jeopardising their chances of career progression. Are exit interviews done, and if not why? Unless if there is an inconvenient fact, that there is a glass ceiling, which becomes tempered or reinforced.

I have a dream that my existence in such a diverse, multicultural society will enable me to be an ambassador, not only for the present generation but for future generations too.

That is the vision I have and hold not only for the NHS, but for Britain as a whole. Can the policies and procedures on diversity and inclusion not only exist on paper, can we see this being practised in real life too?

First published October 2021

My reason for being vaccinated

Farai Mackanyari
Care Coordinator

Losing a close friend to COVID during the early stages of the pandemic made me realise the seriousness of the disease and the need for a robust approach to ending the spread of the virus. It was clear early on that lockdowns were only going to be a temporary measure for minimising the rate of infections and never a plan out of the pandemic. From my perspective, this indicated an urgent need for rapid development of an effective vaccine or ensuring achievement of herd immunity by allowing a controlled fraction of the population to get infected while isolating those with underlying conditions and the elderly. These two options really made me uncomfortable.

Firstly, both my husband and I could be considered 'vulnerable' due to underlying conditions, therefore the option of relying on herd immunity was unsettling, more so considering that we are both frontline staff. Secondly, the rate at which the coronavirus was spreading meant there was little time for a safe vaccine to be developed and fully trialled – this particularly worried me. These fears were compounded by the fact that I work with groups that are more vulnerable than me, which include the elderly and those with serious underlying conditions, most of whom need to be protected. This means that protecting myself and minimising the risk of getting infected by coronavirus is of paramount importance. The news on success of trials from the three front runner vaccines was a breath of fresh air, though a short-lived one. Soon after announcement of the successful trials, social media was awash with both conspiracies and genuine concerns surrounding the rapid development of the vaccines and lack of long-term studies. I was particularly concerned about the mRNA vaccines as they were reported to cause alteration of one's DNA. Through discussions with more knowledgeable colleagues and our network, I was able to quickly understand how the vaccines work, which helped convince my husband and I to take the vaccine. It was however after my son and his wife tested positive for COVID during the Christmas holidays (we decided not to meet for Christmas, fortunately!) that I realised it was time to book for my jab.

Being vaccinated means I can now practice more effectively and provide my patients with the safest care knowing that I do not risk infecting them while providing care. More importantly, I will soon be able to safely meet my children and grandchildren – I am certainly encouraging them to take the vaccination offer as soon as it comes. To all those who are concerned about taking the vaccine, my advice is speak to your GP and only take/share information from credible sources such as the NHS and gov.uk websites – there is a lot of misinformation on the internet. I have also often heard younger people suggesting that they won't take the vaccine because COVID is not killing many young people. If not for you, please do it for the vulnerable population.

First published January 2021

International Women's Day 2021 - A Reflection

Eva Braithwaite
Clinical and Digital Change Lead

Jasmine Harrison, a Yorkshire-born teacher, just rowed solo across the Atlantic, now the youngest woman to make the crossing. This month, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala begins her tenure as the World Trade Organisation's first female Director-General. Eddie Izzard completed a daily marathon and stand-up gig in January in her fundraising quest to 'Make Humanity Great Again'. Professor Sarah Gilbert leads the team that developed the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, with its global, life-saving reach. These are four women who've come (or returned) to my attention in recent months; four of many leading their fields, making contributions and celebrating achievements. In 1911, the first International Women's Day, many ground-breaking actions by women had been taken, though with scarcer celebration and credit. Women's contributions to human advancement and their unique stories were always manifold, if hidden or appropriated. Undoubtedly though, women today have more opportunities than ever to make their mark. The state of things is much improved. Progress has been made.

But progress is not linear, nor uniform. This is true of an individual's journey of recovery, of global struggles for access to health, or indeed, for gender equality. Whilst the general trajectory of progress marches on, we see it tested by the assumption of or reversion to gendered roles and a host of inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. In the UK's first lockdown, two-thirds of extra childcare, home-schooling and unpaid labour was undertaken by women. Additionally, Naila Kabeer reminds us of the feminisation of labour (of industries sustained by the work of women); sectors that are grappling with forced closure, lower wages and increased insecurity in the Covid era.

Gender disparity, both subtle and overt in respect of women's work, is clear and present in women's health and pain too. In recent years, we've seen great bounds in attitudes, policy, rights frameworks and UK law to improve care and support for those with learning disabilities. Yet we know that people with a learning disability have poorer health outcomes and lower life expectancies than those without, whilst figures and experiences get worse still for women. Moreover, access to perinatal and reproductive health, already uneven nationally and globally, is diminished when women hesitate to add pressure to overburdened healthcare systems and pervasive stigma and sociocultural barriers are still to be holistically addressed.

Alongside structurally challenging but diverse experiences of uneven access to care, many contend with direct, interpersonal, gender-based violence. Relationship abuse and domestic violence has been amplified under lockdowns, disproportionately impacting women behind closed doors. Meanwhile, in the public sphere, a multi-pronged attack on trans women as somehow a threat to biological reality and hard-fought feminist rights of women, is as corrosive and damaging as violence and coercion.

An annual day acknowledging women's experiences invites us to consider what's changed in the preceding year, as well as to take the longer view. To do the latter is to see tangible progress, exemplified by the multitude of women leading and working to inspire us all. But through a deadly pandemic, we see obstruction and challenge to this progress from all flanks, with a particularly gendered impact on women who are disabled, unhoused, trans, low-income, of single-parent households, unemployed, of ethnic or religious minorities, and on either end of the general lifespan.

That said, there is no hierarchy of suffering, an unhelpful framework that mostly stops us from speaking about our own challenges. Equally, relative privilege doesn't isolate you from the power structures seeking to diminish your agency as a woman or person, as Dubai's Princess Latifa might attest. Reflecting on this, I have never been clearer that this agency is ours to protect and revere. Wealth and privilege are not required to exercise it. Developing a vaccine or a WTO appointment aren't prerequisites to being valuable or valued. At this very moment, women farmers that make up three quarters of the rural workforce in India – whilst owning 13% of the land – are protesting agrarian reforms, seeking recognition and articulating their agency on an international stage. Feminist groups in France stand in solidarity with networks and advocates seeking change to consent laws, protecting children like 'Julie' from being abused by adults in positions of power. And Dr Sylvia Kama-Kieghe, Sheffield GP and founder of platform AskAwayHealth, is offering clear, sensitive guidance to tackle vaccine hesitancy for communities of colour.

A five-year, international project recently concluded, led by agencies including Sonke, MenEngage Alliance and Promundo. The progressive partners take a transformative, intersectional approach including men and boys in solutions to gender inequality. This is critical to interrelated goals that pursue a state of gender equality, which is in the interest of everyone and at expense of exactly no-one.

International Women's Day celebrates women, of every guise and multi-layered identity. It also reminds us of our capacity and our agency. We use this agency to be better citizens and community leaders, to love our families and to support our service users in the best ways we know. Yet our agency (and the power it brings) is strongest and most joyous when we recognise it in others, when we include everyone, and nobody gets left behind.

First published March 2021

Being a Black African, Christian and Lesbian Women

Martha Betera
Clinical Lead Nurse

Growing up in a small town in the capital of Zimbabwe I was never exposed to the "white people mentality" - well, that's what they call it.

I was born and bred in Harare and went to school there unti I was 16 years old.

I remember when I was young, people used to confused me for a boy

I, when I could, would wear "boyish" clothes. I hated Sundays (church day) or family gatherings as I had no choice but to wear girly clothes...'a dress, glass shoes'.

Well, that's what girls wear, I was told.

By the age of 12-13 I started liking girls a lot, well not the way a girl should like another girl; I used to think.

My father used to tell me I shouldn't hang around with boys and my mother told me if I "play" with boys I will get pregnant.

So; I played with girls instead, dated a few in my teens - nothing serious.

A day before my 18th birthday I arrived in England, not long after I came out as a lesbian.

I always thought my family were cool about it, so I didn't expect the reaction that came next.

I was told I have a 'demon' in me and that I was now acting and behaving like a Westerner.

There were always phone calls, meetings and people chatting about the 'black sheep' of the family.

I saw people distancing themselves from me. I was disowned and I had family members wanting their "name" back; see I got my grandmother's name....this one made me laugh coz I was thinking how on earth are you gonna have the name back; I ain't changing it for no one.

Family gatherings would end up about me. I remember an uncle was always verbally aggressive and at times physically threatening towards me.

At other gatherings, I used to get threats of rape from strangers as they thought that this would turn me straight.

Through all this there were a couple of fist fights, tons of tears, some supportive family members and loads of supportive friends.

I basically learnt to live with other people's views....but made a promise to myself that I was going to live my life for me.

Fast forward to 5-6 years ago, I started my nursing course.

I remember my first clinical placement in a community setting.

The dress code was smart casual...that dress code should not be allowed on any invitation; it's a hard one to pull.

Do I wear jeans and shirt or shirt and formal trousers...jeans are a no no so I went for the latter.

On my way to placement I was thinking are the female patients going to be ok with how I looked, that I'm a lesbian and black....am I too overdressed?

I asked my mentor if I needed to dress more like a "woman" as to not upset the patients. She found this funny and reassured me that I should just be myself and if there was any problem to come and talk to her.

Fast forward two and a half years after qualifying; I got a post as an acting charge nurse.

Have I had any sly comments made behind my back? Yes outside work and at work.

In Africa we don't have lesbians, it's "unAfrican".

Why is she open about being gay?

The Bible condemns gays, God created Adam and Eve not Eve and Eve.

You haven't had a good man yet, that's why you are a lesbian.

How are you going to have a child? The process you speak of is not natural.

You dress like a man so you wanna be a man...you're too soft for someone that wanna be like a man.

On the other hand I have had compliments also...

You are brave. You came out and you live your life and you're not scared to stand up for yourself.

Am I brave? Maybe....but being ME is all I have ever known.

I am an African, black, Christian lesbian woman...from a different culture, with different beliefs.

I am out and proud.

If anyone sees me as brave; well then I shall continue to use my braveness, to anyone in the services, patients or staff, the LGBTQ community, the Africans, the Christians, people of different cultures and beliefs.

To help in supporting with accessing services available.

To support being brave or different.

To support not being left behind in getting help, services or opportunities both in the Trust and beyond.

First published March 2019

New Inspiration

Prince Bhebhe
Specialist Practitioner

My name is Prince Bhebhe and I am writing this personal blog to acknowledge and highlight the inspirations in my life, who are my parents, to encourage and inspire any readers with my journey.

My parents have been a rock in my journey to where I am now. I continue to thrive to reach new heights in my professional as well as personal life. I always remember a quote that signifies the power of my parents in my life which is "behind every young child who believes in himself is a parent who believed first."

Whilst I was studying for my undergraduate degree, I left home and lived in accommodation near the university where I was studying. The motive behind moving out was to become independent. It was my first time moving out of my parents' home and it was a big step but I had felt ready for the challenge. The challenge was something that I had discussed before deciding with my supportive parents. There were some sacrifices that I had to make to survive such as working whilst studying. I was lucky enough to get a job that was linked to what I was studying which meant that I was enhancing my skills and knowledge as well as earning the extra cash to pay my bills and study costs. My parents were very supportive of me and had offered their hand to help out whenever I had required such help. They were understanding of the difficulties that I had faced with balancing studying as well as working and were always there if I needed them. The whole experience of moving out was eye-opening and one that taught me so much about myself. I can genuinely say that the experience even helped me become a better practitioner.

When I finally finished my degree and graduated, I felt a sense of accomplishment. This feeling of accomplishment was more for the joy I had brought to my hardworking parents who sacrificed so much for me to have the best education and opportunities. How I operate and conduct myself in the world, I have inherited from my parents.

Growing up, it was instilled upon me the importance of education and how I must ensure to work hard to create a successful future for myself and my family. I understood from an early age that to achieve anything in life, I must have the drive to make a change and take any opportunity given to me with both hands. My parents have always ensured that wherever I am in my life, I do not lose these values and teachings by constantly ensuring I do not take anything for granted in life.

As much as I am proud of my achievements in my personal and professional life, I can not take full credit for where I am in life without the role models in my life that continue to encourage me and help maintain me on the right track.

I would also like to give a special mention to the late Khulisani Nkala who continues to be a massive role model to me. I appreciate the values and teachings he bestowed upon me and the time he took to mentor me and show me how far I can go in my career with the values instilled upon me by my parents.

My advice to anyone is to follow your passion and don't ever look back. Never be scared to partake in something that is not in your comfort zone and be the difference that you want to see in the world.

First published November 2021

Identity, wellbeing and taking your own advice

Crystal-Bella Romain-Hooper
Research Programme Manager

My name is Crystal and I am the Research Programme Manager in the Trust's wonderful Research and Development Team. I have been part of the team for over five years and with support of colleagues have been lucky enough to progress my career in research.

Knowing what to share in this blog was tough as I haven't done anything like this before; even doing a simple post on Facebook fills me with dread! I decided to bite the bullet and give it a go as an opportunity to challenge myself as we have all been challenged in one way or another throughout this year.

When invited to write this blog I was asked to touch on my identity and what it means to me, so here goes… I don't see my identity as being about the material things like the way I look, the colour of my skin, or how I choose to dress, but more about who I am as a person and how others perceive me. To me, my identity is more about what dictates my emotions, how I express myself, what drives me, my inspiration/aspiration and the morals I choose to live by. Words I feel I identify with spring to mind such as personable, flexible, laid back, and love a challenge. It is also defined by my many flaws (nobody is perfect), my limitations, and all those little failures in life.

I always think we should be grateful for some of those failures we have in life, big or small; those job interviews that were not successful, the tests we failed, the mistakes we made at work and in our home-life, and all those times we felt we said the wrong thing. Those are the things that I am grateful for because, as cheesy as it sounds, those are the things that have taught me how to get it right sometimes, and without those mistakes we wouldn't be who or where we are today.

One of the self-confessed flaws I have always found tough to overcome is not following my own advice. I am sure there are many others like me who are very quick to advise others on how they could be looking after themselves better and the importance of taking time for you but not doing this yourself! The last year has really reminded me to finally start following some of my own advice to stay well both mentally and physically. If the past year has taught me anything it would be this – it's so important to take your own advice! A little quote I love on this: "I don't practice what I preach, I preach what I practice."

Everyone has had everything thrown at them over the past year and we have all pulled together as a society and adapted to a very different way of living. As a line manager this called for a more supportive, flexible approach and really challenged my communication and leadership skills, so I could be there to offer what felt like a new level of support to colleagues through such a difficult time. I needed to make sure, more than ever, that I was looking after myself so I could be in the right place to offer that support.

The Trust has a great range of wellbeing resources on offer to us and recently I have taken advantage of the peer support leadership circles workshops which have been a great place to share experiences with colleagues from other services, which makes you feel like you are not alone in some of the challenges you face day-to-day. It is not about waving a magic wand to make them go away, but having a safe space to reflect and learn from others has been really useful.

Switching off and taking that time out from the challenges of the day has been so important to me and has kept me motivated and able to keep that positive energy up. Even now when restrictions are easing it's important to keep up those routines we have built for ourselves.

Those walks out in the countryside or just around the local area after the working day are so important to me and I don't know where I would have been without that escape from the four walls.

We are always told that the great outdoors and fresh air make a difference to our mental health, and they really do!

First published June 2021

Have you ever considered approaching a coach?

Elton D Dube
Clinical Lead Nurse

First published July 2021

Hi my name is Elton D Dube, I've been qualified as a nurse for over 13 years now. I had the opportunity to work in various ward environments and with complex mental health needs and disorders, that required me to have the ability to think on my feet to deal with many challenges and moments along the way.

I then decided it was time for a change hence I made that decision to move to Adult Male Acute Services recently to have a new experience. I initially joined my current team at Band 5 level however shortly after this move an opportunity to progress to Band 6 level arose and I thought I really needed to put my name into 'the hat' to be considered for this position, as I thought I had gained enough experience and knowledge over the years hence I felt I would have a lot to offer. However as I was starting my preparations for the interview I realized that I lacked a bit of confidence relating to interviewing experiences and directions of how I needed to tackle or deal with an interview in such short notice especially since I hadn't had any interview experience for some time.

During one clinical supervision session with my Practice Development Nurse, she asked me if I had ever thought about or considered approaching a Coach and how this would potentially be very helpful and beneficial to build my confidence and give me direction of how I needed to prepare for the interview. My Practice Development Nurse is a member of our Workforce Race Equality Network and signposted me to the network for peer support and interview coaching. She recommended a member who is also a trained and a practising Coach. I decided to take her up on this offer and urgently got in touch with the network member who responded to my email promptly and agreed to meet up with me at short notice prior to the interview.

This meeting took place via Zoom due to the ongoing Covid 19 period. Having access to peer support and coaching allowed me to reflect and consider what I needed to focus on as well as how I needed to approach the interview i.e. acknowledging my strengths and positives while at the same time explaining my journey from when I first started as a Band 5 staff nurse to now.

This coaching session also helped me to refocus my mind and appreciate all the experience I had gained over the years, as well as appreciate my personal and clinical strengths while at the same time not forgetting my short-comings. Going into my Band 6 interview I felt much more confident than I would have had I not had any input and support from a Coach. With that I was successful in my Band 6 interview and got the job.

So to anyone considering having coaching or seeking out peer support I would say do not hesitate at all, it really helped and benefited me so much and there is no reason why it would not benefit you. I have been inspired by my coaching experience so much so that I am thinking of training as one in the near future so that I can help others like I was helped.

My Christmas message

Munyarardzi Mususa
CMHT Care Coordinator

I love Christmas. It's a special time for me. Many things come to mind; childhood memories with my late grandparents; my parents; my cousins, my aunties and uncles.

There was no occasion like Christmas in Zimbabwe where I grew up. We went to church on Christmas Eve, and on Christmas Day, the excitement; the gifts; the food; playing outside in the sun as children; the home disco; the dancing.

I realise how fortunate I am to harbour these memories. I speak about these experiences to my kids and friends with nostalgia and pride. "Christmas time brings pleasant memories to all of us", I say to myself. As I am writing this, I suddenly become aware of my present. It's 2019, days before Christmas. I can literally feel the Christmas spirit around me, the excitement and anticipation. Christmas Carols and Christmas themed pop music is playing on the radio in the background.

In the middle of singing along to a pop song, an image appears in my mind. The image of man 'Dave', walking the streets, rummaging through waste bins, thirsty, hungry, lonely, cold and wet from the rain. I see people like 'Dave' a lot in my job and life. Where will 'Dave' be at Christmas?

I feel I realise that there are others who have not been fortunate to experience Christmas in the positive way that I did, for various reasons, not of their own making. I also think about others who are going through difficult times this Christmas in their personal lives.

As I enjoy Christmas with loved ones, I will be thinking of 'Dave' and others who may not be so fortunate this Christmas. I will be thinking about how I could have given 'Dave' a positive experience this Christmas; a blanket to spare and a hot drink; a meal to ease the hunger pangs. If I could direct him to a shelter with warmth?

I may not always be able to provide any of the above, but I can spare a thought for 'Dave'. A little gesture to make that moment of contact with 'Dave' a positive experience; even if it's the briefest of interactions; a silent prayer; a good morning; a good evening; a smile; with care, respect, and compassion. That could go a long way in making 'Dave's' Christmas a positive one, so when you are out and about remember those who may not be as fortunate than us and always be kind.

First published December December 2019

The Invisible Dreams

Dr Miriam Isaac
Consultant Psychiatrist

Tread gentle on those norms they warned
Assertive but subtle should be your tone
Speak up yet submit to the might
Succeed but be the shadow in the night
Look different but be the same
Just enough for the guessing game
Curb the inner child within
Lest you dare to dream again!

How tiring it must be
To pretend how not to be
What a pity that would be
If a soul has forgotten the dreams.
Those barriers that restrain who we are
So invisible yet the perfect emotional arc
Keeps our spirits in a tight line
For those who dare to see it shine

Exhausted and lost you must not be
'Coz you are not alone in this sea
Conform not to what dictates

But accept our beauty innate
Strength, most think, should storm and roar
But little did that stream explode
It trickled and flowed till that stone
Bend its might, paving a new tone
That's how changes are made
Ripple by ripple, wave after wave.

Look around and don't lose sight
Of those who fought for our very rights
Some may lose, some gain
Someone else may dream again
When life feels dull and heavy inside
Think of an eagle in its flight
That lets the wind help it soar
Right above the storm below.

When there is a moment to reflect
Try and remember your true self
Those longings that once made us dance
Still awaits patiently for our glance…
Our dreams are stronger than we think
It certainly takes us soaring above the wind!
Be that change that takes you there
To those very dreams, you once dared.

First published November 2021

End of Year Spiritual Reflection

Rev Dr M. C. Mkpadi

Before we begin to make all our plans and set all our goals for the coming year, we ought to take some time to reflect on the current year and tie up whatever loose ends we have. We should desire to go into 2022 with confidence, grace, and healed hearts.

One of the most difficult things about changing seasons is leaving the past behind us and moving forward to what lies ahead (Philippians 3:13). This can be hard to do, especially if we've had a hard year and are struggling to feel positive about what may come next. And yet, even when things have been so sweet, we can be uncertain of the coming year – will it threaten the peace and happiness we've come to enjoy? Looking to the future means looking to the unknown.

Either way, we have learned that through Christ, all things are possible. That means that no matter what 2021 held for you, Christ is able to walk alongside you to help you to move forward in your life. This doesn't mean that we should push our feelings and thoughts aside in an attempt to hurry and get over them for the sake of a new year. Rather, we have to be willing to let go of control and allow Christ to reign and rule over our lives, submitting to his authority and plan, and trust him to help us in whatever way we need while we move forward.

Take some time between now and the new year to think through your 2021. Take note of the condition of your heart and why it is in the current shape that it's in. Then, in your secret prayer time, go to the Lord and have him survey your heart. Open it wide for him, lay your 2021 at his feet, and choose to walk with him to the place that he has for you.

The LTHT Staff Health & Wellbeing Support Network published this advice for their staff on self-compassion. I think the advice will help us prepare for the coming year

"Compassion is a fundamental part of all our jobs and is likely to have been part of the reason we joined the NHS in the first place. Compassion is our ability to notice that someone is struggling and having the motivation to do something about it. Compassion for our patients comes naturally; but what about when the 'someone who is struggling' is us? This pandemic has been our hour of need. Have we taken time to notice our own struggle? Have we treated ourselves with the same compassion we give others? Have we accepted offers of support and kindness from those around us; our families, our friends, our colleagues? For many of us, the answer will be "no." We need to experience compassion in our lives because right now our lives are hard. This past year, we've all suffered to some degree, and at times been overwhelmed by our experiences, almost all of which have been way beyond our control. We didn't ask for this. We've just found ourselves here and we are trying to cope in any way we can. And, on top of it all, we've got minds that tell us we should be coping better. It is tough to be kind to ourselves without accompanying troublesome thoughts and feelings but we can start by using the diffusion techniques to 'unhook' from our judgements about self-compassion."

It is equally important that a frontline clinical team should practice self-compassion. In our Trust we developed an on-going practice of compassionate care for staff which started in 2015 in all our hospitals. The practice was interrupted by COVID in 2020. Our hope is that this practice cherished by many will start again in the new year.

Here is a small prayer that you can pray as you reflect on this year and prepare your heart and mind for the New Year that is coming:

Lord, Today we in complete sincerity welcome You into this new year and new decade of our lives. We know that no good thing comes except by You. We do not seek blessings from a place of pride or selfish ambition, rather, we seek them in order that we may come to know Your heart better and live a holy life praising your name and striving for your Kingdom. Take us further and deeper than all we could ask for or imagine this year, oh Lord. Bless us beyond what we believe and in the process, instil in us the perfect truth that You are the only God, and that You love us. In Jesus name, Amen.

First published December 2021

integrity
simplicity
caring

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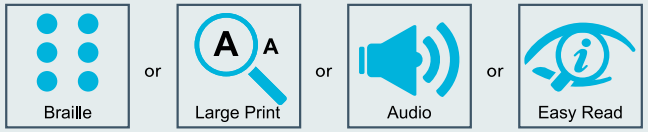

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