



ACCULTURATIVE STRESS AND SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

A BRIEF GUIDE FOR CLINICIANS

Acculturative Stress refers to the stress responses and challenges experienced during acculturation, or adapting to the dominant culture

Acculturative stress is a risk factor for mental health problems

South Asia is comprised of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

South Asian American (SAA) adolescents, specifically children of South Asian (SA) immigrants, make up a substantial and growing portion of the United States (US) youth population

South Asian countries have the highest reported prevalence of mental health disorders, and the population of first- and second-generation youth of South Asian origin in the US will continue to grow

Despite a large SAA adolescent presence in the US and the predicted growth, knowledge around SAA adolescent mental health is quite limited

Adolescence is a significant transition period with a greater risk of mental health problems to emerge

Children of immigrants are also at an increased risk of experiencing mental health problems



SAA adolescents may experience conflicting messages around adolescence, which can complicate identity development that often occurs during adolescence

Autonomy is a hallmark trait of adolescence within Western society, but autonomy is not traditionally characteristic of adolescence within South Asian cultures and may even be considered disobedient

CLINICIANS SHOULD BE AWARE OF THEMES AROUND ACCULTURATIVE STRESS THAT MAY EMERGE IN ORDER TO PROVIDE CULTURALLY INFORMED CARE



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COMMON THEMES



1

BALANCING COLLECTIVISTIC & INDIVIDUALISTIC VALUES

- Adolescence in America is often touted as a period of autonomy and exploration
- In South Asian and SAA cultures, adolescence continues to be a period of upholding community interests and well-being
- Critical identity development can be complicated by the conflicting values and demands
- Distress about making independent decisions or setting boundaries that conflict with family/community desires
- Resentment about having to conform to community expectations

ex: prioritizing well-being vs. making sacrifices for family/community, rewarded for being a leader or outgoing at school vs. expected to show deference at home, setting boundaries vs. maintaining group harmony, feeling guilty for spending time with friends, making significant decisions (e.g., career, education) for oneself vs. for family's interests

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLINICIANS

- Offer adolescents space to discuss discrepancies in values and how this impacts their decision making
- Discuss the varying views of adolescence from their different cultures
- Validate the difficulty around negotiating different value systems, and promote self-compassion
- Explore pros and cons to specific values, which ones they prioritize, and who they struggle balancing their values around
- Identify behaviors that align with their chosen values and behaviors that feel required in order to satisfy others' values
- Consider applying dialectics (ex: "I feel guilty for setting boundaries with my family, and I still love them and may not have done anything wrong"; "I love my values and feel like an outsider because of the values championed in mainstream society")



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COMMON THEMES

2

LIVING A DOUBLE LIFE

- SAA adolescents may find difficulty expressing ties to both cultures
- Pressure to change their behaviors or expressions, or "codeswitch," depending on their surroundings
- Fearing rejection from their American and SAA communities, peers, or family for not identifying with one culture enough
- Difficulty finding space to openly share aspects of their cultures and negotiate ethnic-racial identity

ex: hiding South Asian food at school, enjoying Bollywood films more than Hollywood, feeling aversive to South Asian pop-culture, difficulty navigating multiple languages, separating South Asian friends and non-South Asian friends, engaging in religious or cultural traditions (i.e., singing, dancing, Sunday School) but avoid sharing with non-South Asian friends, lying to parents about interests & relationships, feeling embarrassment about wearing traditional South Asian attire



GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLINICIANS

- Discuss acculturative stress and examples with adolescents, along with relevant examples portrayed in media
- Facilitate bicultural identity development by facilitating exploration of family heritage, identifying role models of similar cultural backgrounds, and practicing traditions and rituals they enjoy from both cultures
- Identify cultural immersion camps/events for youth
- Help locate a South Asian American youth community to normalize and provide support for these dilemmas, while also encouraging identity development

(disclaimer: be cognizant of whether SAA communities are a source of stress because of within-group comparisons, competition, and gossip that can be common between SAA families)



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COMMON THEMES



3

FAMILIAL/INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICTS

- Different values, degree of acculturation, and commitment to traditions can often cause conflicts
- Parents may have a greater desire to transfer South Asian customs and religious knowledge onto adolescents
- SAA adolescents resist and want to explore social relationships and American traditions
- Communication styles and emotional expression may vary as a function of where family members were socialized as well
- Given the facilitative role of education in many SA immigrant families' journeys, SAA communities and parents may expect adolescents to prioritize and excel in academics over other interests

ex: pressure to pursue stable "prestigious" jobs (e.g., doctor, engineer) and excel academically, disagreements about socializing and engaging in non-academic activities, facing disapproval about romantic relationships or stress about hiding relationships, shame-based parenting practices, adolescents defying traditional expectations (e.g., marrying young, conforming to family needs, avoiding risks), feeling unable to discuss emotions with family

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLINICIANS

- Help facilitate family cohesion by finding commonalities between parents and adolescents
- Provide skills to facilitate perspective taking and warmth to help adolescents understand parents' ideologies and expectations, as well as communication skills to introduce common acculturation-related conflicts (i.e., wanting to adopt American customs, exploring social or romantic relationships, and their passions)
- Provide parenting skills on cognitive restructuring to reframe and understand children's acculturation preferences and inclination towards autonomy, and communication skills (i.e., perspective taking, collaborating) to resolve frequent intergenerational, acculturation-related conflict



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COMMON THEMES

HATE

BULLY

4

DISCRIMINATION & RACISM

- Fueled by the perpetual foreigner stereotype, xenophobia, and post-9/11 stereotypes
- SAA adolescents may face derogatory comments, microaggressions, and physical attacks about being foreigners, threats, or terrorists
- SAA youth may be bullied at school based on assumptions about their academic achievement, hobbies, food preferences, language abilities, and religious affiliations
- Discrimination exists between SAA subgroups (i.e., caste, religious groups)



ex: Muslim American and Sikh American youth who wear religious head coverings (i.e., hijabs, turbans) may be more openly victimized and perceived as foreigners or terrorists, Sikh Americans may be falsely perceived as Muslim and face Islamophobic discrimination and violence, caste-based violence, conflict between Hindus and Muslims, colorism

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLINICIANS

- Encourage ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) directly with adolescents or by providing parents with skills to help socialize adolescents to the values, traditions, and practices related to their ethnicity
 - Cultural socialization (i.e., providing information about cultural values, customs, traditions, and history; instilling pride in their culture)
- Identify role models of similar ethnic-racial background
- Discuss Eurocentric beauty standards that impact self-esteem
- Prepare adolescents for discrimination by warning about potential discrimination and brainstorming coping skills
- Encourage SAA adolescents to explore and discuss historical contexts fueling bias and conflicts between SA subgroups (i.e., colonization, partition, anti-Black rhetoric)



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NOTE: SAA populations are incredibly diverse and should not be viewed as a monolith. This guide is intended to provide a general framework for clinicians who may not be as familiar with these themes; greater nuances exist. These examples are not meant to perpetuate stereotypes, and do not fully illustrate how intersectional identities (i.e., gender, immigration status, religion, caste, educational background, ethnolinguistic, etc.) and individual differences may interact with or amplify the impacts of acculturative stress on mental health.

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