

Facing Divorce Stigma in South Asian communities

Priya, a second generation Australian-Indian, had a lavish four-day long destination wedding in India to her boyfriend of three years.

"After we got married, we moved in together — then six months into our marriage, I had a gut feeling something wasn't right," says Priya.

Priya's 'gut feeling' led her to uncover that her husband had been unfaithful on multiple occasions.

"The first time it happened, I tried to move past it," she says.

"Then it happened again and when I confronted him, he broke down, played the victim and said he needed help. I stayed and tried to get him help.

"I chose to marry this person, so I felt like I owed it to myself to work through the issues with him."

The stigma of divorce in South Asian communities

In Australia, it's a safe bet to assume that most of us know someone who has been divorced. The latest ABS data shows more than 49,000 divorces were granted in 2019, around 1.9 per 1,000 Australian residents. The largest proportion of couples divorcing are those married nine years or less.

But divorce is still stigmatised and relatively rare within South Asian communities in Australia.

Most women in these communities are expected to tolerate hardship, prioritise their partner's needs, and experience troubles without speaking up.

Sandi Silva, a counsellor from Melbourne who specialises in providing culturally sensitive therapy, has supported multiple south Asian women who have been fearful about the backlash from their families, communities and in-laws if they get a divorce.

"These women have over-stayed in loveless marriages, and in more severe cases, marriages where they were victim to abuse and mistreatment," she says.

"Divorced women are often seen to be non-compliant to these expectations, and are labeled as selfish, unwilling to compromise or unable to tolerate the challenges that come with marriage — regardless of the circumstances around the divorce.

"This messaging implies that if you can't meet these cultural expectations, there must be something wrong with you.

"It suggests that you are the problem rather than the narrow cultural expectations."

During the two years of her husband's continuous infidelity, Priya didn't tell anyone what was happening in her marriage.

She felt shame for being in a failing marriage that was headed towards a divorce, and she also lacked the confidence and strength to speak out.

"Growing up in the Indian community, you're expected to just deal with things," Priya says.

"It's very much about keeping up appearances and worrying about what the community will think or say, rather than doing what's right for you."

Divorce in migrant families

When Indra and his partner broke up after only a year of marriage, he realised he wasn't just divorcing one person. He was divorcing a whole family.

Priya was worried about what people in her community might say if she divorced her husband of 'only' two years after an extravagant wedding.

"We put up a front the whole time — we bought a house, had a little puppy, and from the outside we looked very happy," Priya says.

Deciding to leave her marriage wasn't easy, and she thought no-one would believe her story.

"I spent two months taking screenshots of messages and emails he was sending other women, because I felt like I needed proof before leaving," Priya says.

The concept of gathering 'evidence' to justify one's decision to leave a marriage is an unfortunate reality for many South Asians. Having

proof is a way to deal with the backlash from the family or community.

"Priya's case highlights that judgments are made on face value — if the relationship looks good on the outside, there should be no reason for divorce," Ms Silva says.

"In South Asian communities there are only a few reasons — such as when it is life-threatening or completely unbearable — where getting a divorce may be considered acceptable.

"Realising that you're incompatible or simply unhappy, unsatisfied or unfulfilled in a marriage are not seen as acceptable reasons," explains Ms Silva.

Priya's parents were shocked at first, but they were understanding and supportive of her decision.

For Priya's mum, Deepa*, watching her daughter go through a divorce empowered her to take stock of her own life.

"My parents' marriage had been rocky for years," Priya says.

"My mum saw me go through a divorce, but saw that I came out on the other side and was able to live my best life.

"This gave her reassurance that she, too, deserves to live a fulfilling life and didn't need to stay in an unhappy marriage."

Although she hesitated for years, Deepa was surprised at how supportive her community was when she finally opened up to her friends about her marriage.

"Of course there will be some chatter within the community, but life goes on — people forget and move on, so do what's important for your own happiness," Deepa says.

How to pull off a 'good' divorce

Break-ups are raw, traumatic and bewildering but some people manage to have a "good" divorce.

How to destigmatise divorce

Ms Silva says changing taboos and stigma around divorce starts with the conversations we're having with our friends and family:

If you hear your friends or 'aunties' making comments about someone's marital problems, you can call out this behaviour by: choosing not to partake in the discussion; telling them that relationships are complex and it's not possible for anyone outside the relationship to understand the intricacies behind the issues within them; and reminding them that decisions around relationships are up to the individual. It's not appropriate or helpful to pass judgement on other people's relationship.

Before giving any advice, reflect on any biases you may have internalised from your own upbringing or culture. We all inherit the messaging we've grown up around, so take an honest and compassionate approach to uncover your own perceptions regarding divorce. To start this process, ask yourself: How would I feel if I were going through a divorce? Would I feel ashamed, like a failure? If so, why?

If someone in your community is going through a divorce, you can remind them that it's OK to set boundaries between themselves and the community, or their family, during this time. Boundaries could look like less time with family or at community events, asking not to

talk about the divorce when they are feeling uncomfortable, or choosing to live on their own instead of moving back home with family.

Happily ever after, but not as expected

As for Priya, she is now in a secure, trusting relationship, but her perspective on marriage has changed.

"Growing up in the South Asian community it was always about reputation or wanting to portray a certain image of yourself because it's idealised — including seeing marriage in a glorified light," she says.

"But I now see it's more about being in a honest, happy relationship with the right person — rather than just ticking off a box."

*Name changed for privacy reasons.