

What emotional trauma can look like for South Asian women

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Body Image

From a young age South Asian women are criticized for being too curvy, thin, short, and tall, not having straight enough hair, having too much body hair, the list goes on. The messages SA women obtain from a young age are that superficial beauty markers are a priority. The community encourages women to be thin, fair, and tall. However, if you are too thin or too tall, those characteristics are critiqued as well. It can often feel as though nothing you accomplish is adequate in meeting the impossible beauty demands. This can significantly impact mental health and self-esteem. It can result in unhealthy habits that can have lasting physical and mental health effects.

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Colorism

As a South Asian woman you may have often been advised to remain indoors and stay out of the sun to avoid darkening pigmentation. There is the promotion of the use of skin bleaching creams from a young age as “fair” and light-skin is considered aspirational and a mark of beauty. Those who are darker-skinned or enjoy a weekend at the beach will have their skin color chastised and the immediate topic of conversation. “You’re too dark; no one will want to marry you.”

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Education/Career

South Asian women often face conflicting demands within a patriarchal system. They are told they must pursue professional careers and higher education to be viewed as a hot commodity for marriage. However, if they are to achieve positions of power within their careers that may surpass their male counterparts, it's viewed as threatening and unappealing. They are also provided messaging that their career must come second to marriage and parenthood. One must set aside career aspirations to be the dutiful wife, yet where (an Ivy League) and when education is obtained determines worth in the larger community. These conflicting demands can sometimes promote feelings of not being “good enough.”

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Marriage

From a young age, South Asian women may receive feedback that their ultimate path to success and happiness is marriage. You may be told to act a certain way or learn specific skills to be most appealing for a match. Additionally, getting married early and into a “good” family is pressured. What’s considered “good” is subject to family opinion. Women may not be provided an opportunity to determine what “good” means to them because of the limitations and judgments placed on dating. A partner who does not meet familial approval can be seen as the ultimate failure. This pursuit of happiness in romantic relationships and conflict with familial interests adds an undue burden on well being. it goes counter to our learned expectation of prioritizing family happiness over our individual hapiness

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Family Planning

Even after marriage the expectations for women remain high. As you age or your marriage matures, you may hear critiques of your family planning approach. You may experience frequent questioning about your reluctance/plans to have a child. It can feel like your worth as a woman is tied to your ability to rear children. Furthermore, the birth of male children is held at significantly higher regard than female children. Therefore, the lack of reproduction of a male child may become the focus of frequent community critique.

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Gaslighting

All of these experiences can best be categorized under gaslighting. Experiences in which the individual victim is confused into thinking their responses, feelings, thoughts, etc. are overreactions. The push and pull of the differing demands can be taxing, confusing, and frustrating. All of those experiences are valid, especially when presented with such conflicting expectations at every life stage.

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First, you are enough. You in your truest, most authentic form are ENOUGH. These social judgements do not define your worth. Name the experience—these problematic demands are traumatic/abusive. Call it what it is, once we are able to do so it gives us the power to remove that burden from ourselves and begin our individual healing process

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