

# INFORMATION AND RESOURCES: SOUTH ASIAN EXPERIENCES OF EATING DISORDERS



“As a South Asian woman, I didn’t understand my eating disorder for a long time... Growing up I struggled with ‘traditional’ food, but eating it was a sign of respect in my culture... after a while I found therapists who understood my identity and the ways in which this influenced my triggers and fears - they were the help I had desperately been seeking” ~ East London resident

When **worries about your food**, shape and weight get to the point where they affect your **behaviour** and **everyday life**, this can be indicative of an eating disorder. Eating disorders can affect **people from any background**, and it is generally thought that they occur at similar levels among **South Asian** populations. [1]

In the **East London Community Eating Disorder Service**, people from a South Asian background have told us that they face particular **barriers in getting help** for disordered eating, and that it would be helpful to have access to **information** about what they might be **experiencing**. We have worked with **local residents** to pull together a few resources, which you can find below.

*The links shared here are just a few examples of some common experiences and challenges that have resonated with local residents. We know there will be many more experiences not captured here, and welcome suggestions for further ideas*  
[elft.disorderedeatingsupport@nhs.net](mailto:elft.disorderedeatingsupport@nhs.net)

# RAMADAN



## Ramadan and Eating Disorders

In this [article](#), registered Dietitian Fareeha Jay discusses how fasting during Ramadan can affect those with eating disorders and offers tips for coping during this period. Read more in the full article [here](#). [2]

### Summary

There is a common misconception that **eating disorders (ED)** are **culturally** bound; however, research and statistics demonstrate that they are a **prevalent issue within the South Asian community**.

**Fasting** can **trigger** ED, fasting can trigger a **relapse**, and fasting can **mask** ED.

Eating at a certain time and consuming a '**celebratory**' meal to break fast can conclude in people with **bulimia** binge eating and purging.

Ramadan focuses around **communal eating**, often eating with family and friends. This public facing eating can **overwhelm** people struggling with ED.

In **Islam**, it is clearly stated in the **Quran** that someone who is **unable** to fast can offer **Fidya** and does not need to fast. People with **ED** can **participate** in the holy month of **Ramadan** in other ways without having

to fast. It's a time of **self reflection** and bettering yourselves, this can be **achieved** in many other ways.

Whether you decide to **fast**, or to **abstain**, have clear conversations with **family** and **friends** about your **struggles**, reach out for **help**, have a **self care** plan in place and most importantly be **kind** to yourself.

## Ramadan and Eating Disorder Guide

In this [guide](#), eating disorder psychologist Dr Omara Naseem shares information to help people with an eating disorder observing Ramadan. Read more in the full guide [here](#). [3]

### Summary

What is **Ramadan** and should I be **fasting** with an **Eating Disorder**? This guide includes information on themes such as:

- The **role of fasting** and **deciding** whether or not to partake
- Information around **steps to take** if you decide to fast
- **Meal** planning, seeking help and **looking after yourself**
- Additional information for **family and carers** to support loved ones during Ramadan
- **Self help** tips, **mindful** activities and **self reflection** ideas



## Ramadan fasting tips for those recovering from ED

Ramadan can be extremely challenging both mentally and physically for someone with an eating disorder. Here are some tips to help those with an eating disorder during Ramadan:

See Salah as an opportunity for mindfulness.

Keep a Ramadan reflection journal.

Set boundaries around feasting with others.

Talk to someone close and let them know how they can support you throughout Ramadan.

Have a prevention plan ready.

Make time for suhoor.

Be mindful that other people may have different food tastes and energy requirements compared to you.

Make sure you do not miss Suhoor or Iftar as this will increase the risk of losing control the next time you eat.

Tips taken from [healthline.com](https://www.healthline.com) and [amalia.com](https://www.amalia.com) [4] [5]

# EATING DISORDERS AND MEN

A decorative background on the right side of the page. It features a circular globe with blue and green watercolor-like textures. Overlaid on the globe are several white line-art illustrations of hanging lanterns, crescent moons, and stars, suggesting a South Asian or Islamic theme.


## Eating Disorders and South Asian men

This [resource](#) from Forward Thinking Birmingham provides information and points for reflection about eating disorders within South Asian men. It has been written by a South Asian male with personal experience of an eating disorder. Access the full resource [here](#). [6]

### Summary

Drawing on his own experiences, the author explores “some **common messages that you may receive**, accompanied by alternative messages and thoughts rooted in South Asian culture”.

The resource also includes further sections on:

- South Asian **identity** as a protective factor
  - Western and South Asian **cultures**
  - Bridging the **generational** gap
  - South Asian **celebrities** and hearing their voices
- 
- An abstract watercolor background at the bottom of the page, featuring blended colors of orange, yellow, and green.

A decorative header featuring a stylized globe in shades of blue and green on the right side. Overlaid on the globe and extending to the left are several white line-art illustrations of hanging lanterns, crescent moons, and stars. A solid olive-green horizontal band spans the width of the page, containing the title 'PERSONAL STORIES' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

# PERSONAL STORIES

## Sandeep's story

In this short [video](#) from mental health charity Mind, Sandeep shares how family, faith and helping others have helped her eating disorder recovery. We also hear from Sandeep's mum. Watch the full video [here](#). [7]

*Content warning: mentions of suicide*

## Eating Disorders among the South Asian British population

In this [blog post](#) shared by eating disorder charity SEED, a South Asian British person shares their personal experience of eating disorder recovery. The full article can be read [here](#). [8]

### Summary

In this article, the author shares how they have experienced some of the following themes:

- **Cultural influences** on stigma around mental health and eating disorders

- Challenging **stereotypes** around eating disorders
- The **role that food plays** in South Asian families and the pressures this can bring
- Challenges around **seeking help** as a South Asian person suffering with an eating disorder

## Coping with Ramadan and fasting

This [article](#) published by CNN hears about the experiences of Habiba and Farheen, and how they have navigated decisions around fasting and Ramadan. Read the full article [here](#). [9]

### Summary


For **Muslims** with an **Eating Disorder (ED)** the fear of **Ramadan** is real. Not being able to fast can almost make you feel like less of a person. How fasting can bring back feelings of **hunger** and starvation as a feeling that is acceptable, how this affects **mental health** for those struggling and/or recovering from an ED.

The act of **fasting** during day light hours can **mask** an eating disorder and make situations worse for sufferers without being noticed due to the nature of **refraining** from **food** at certain hours.

**South Asian women** can feel forced to fit into strict gender roles, with that comes body, size and image. This places extreme pressure on the







community; often body types can feel as if they are being audited by extended family members and told if you are too big or too small.

Seeking **help** for **Eating Disorders** as a **South Asian** person poses its own issues, seeking help from services that don't always understand the **cultural issues** that are so interrelated to the Eating Disorder someone is experiencing and trying to recover from.

**Breaking the cycle**, **faith leaders** and **Muslim** organisations should acknowledge ED as an issue in the community. Faith leaders and family members should acknowledge the **challenges Muslims** with mental health struggles face during Ramadan and offer them **guidance** to help break the intergenerational cycle of **shame** and **guilt** that exists across society.

## Further information & support

For further information about **different types of eating disorders** and the **support available** to **adults** in East London, please visit the **East London Eating Disorder Service website** [here](#). If you are an adult living in the boroughs of **Tower Hamlets**, **Newham** or **City & Hackney**, you can refer yourself directly using the [self-referral form](#). Or, you can ask your GP or another health professional to make a referral for you.

If you live outside of these boroughs, you can search for your local NHS eating disorder service [here](#).

**If you are struggling, you deserve to  
ask for help.**





# References

[1]<https://firststepsed.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/ED-South-Asians-brochure-1-1.pdf>

[2]<https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/ramadan-and-eating-disorders.html#:~:text=Fasting%20can%20trigger%20ED,Fasting%20may%20>

[3][https://omaranaseem.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Ramadan-and-Eating-Disorder-Guide-Dr-Naseem\\_V3.pdf](https://omaranaseem.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Ramadan-and-Eating-Disorder-Guide-Dr-Naseem_V3.pdf)

[4]<https://www.healthline.com/health/fasting-for-ramadan-with-an-eating-disorder#ramadan-without-fasting>

[5]<https://www.amaliah.com/post/62249/dealing-eating-disorders-mental-health-ramadan-fasting-anorexia-bulimia-binge-eating>

[6]<https://forwardthinkingbirmingham.nhs.uk/download/south-asian-history-month-and-eating-disorders.pdf?ver=32626>

[7] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJXlr20HM3Y>

[8]<https://seed.charity/eating-disorders-eds-among-the-south-asian-british-population/>

[9]<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/24/health/ramadan-eating-disorders-muslims-wellness-intl-cmd/index.html>