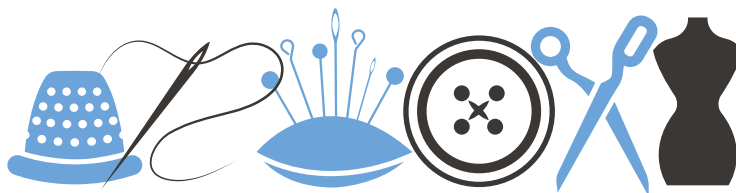


Imtaz Khaliq



The body holds the score. Before I trained as a counsellor I was a bespoke tailor based in London's Bond Street with acclaimed clients, profiled by *The Sunday Times* and featured on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*. Success, however, came at the price of losing my hair – in 2010, when my career was at its peak and I was awarded an MBE, I developed alopecia. I was anxious all the time and my body shouted at me to let me know with the loss of my hair.

Alopecia led me to question my identity. Now others saw that I was feeling not comfortable in my skin. Alopecia is an autoimmune condition – my body was attacking the healthy hair follicles.

Getting help can be hard. Eventually I was referred for psychodermatology – the treatment of skin disorders using psychological and psychiatric techniques by addressing the interaction between the mind and the skin. I learned that how I viewed the hair loss was key, and that the mind can take you to the top as well as to the bottom. My journey to understand this eventually led me to retrain to be a counsellor.

I tried to be someone. I learned to graft like my Pakistani parents who worked hard to be good immigrants. My father answered an advertisement for post-war workers needed in the Bradford textile mills, and later set up his own business. I came to study at the London College of Fashion in my 20s because I had discovered I was 'in flow' when creating clothes, finally focused on one task and not experiencing negative self-talk.

Success can be lonely. In the community, standing out from the crowd as a female in a patriarchal society led to talk and reputation slurs. I also had to challenge cultural and societal expectations as an Asian female tailor in a white male-dominated industry. In later years I was invited to give talks about my story at prestigious events at the House of Lords, the British Library, City Hall, women's organisations and education establishments.

Self-compassion is complex. Managing backdraft in self-compassion – the initial distress and turbulence you experience when you

attempt to be kind to yourself – can be challenging, and you need support to understand and work through it.

Dyslexia comes with advantages. I had dyslexia diagnosed only last year. The focus is often on its challenges rather than the advantages, such as being good at communicating and being able to put concepts and strategy together. My years of being overlooked in education led to me becoming a 'highly compensated' dyslexic, pushing myself to achieve. In counselling I learned to start feeling and try to stop striving.

We can all reframe our narrative. After years of thinking there was something wrong with me being a brown girl and a slow learner, it was liberating to hear that 'the problem' is the problem – *you* are not the problem. When the problem is externalised we feel validated and freed from the tyranny of isolation, shame and blame.

Groupwork is powerful. I have run counselling groups for two London NHS trusts and am currently involved in the National Institute for Health and Care Research-funded ERA randomised control trial comparing group arts therapies with group talking therapy, for East London NHS Foundation Trust. When human suffering is given a label it can lead to internal and external stigma. Group support and psychoeducation can help you see you are not alone. Collective rather than individualistic strategies out of illness are needed to create equity, giving people what they need, when they need it. Humans need connection.

Hope brings meaning. Trauma memory is a state of the body. It can bypass conscious recall only to resurface years later. But the principles of recovery from trauma are hope, opportunity and taking control, despite life's challenges, to lead a meaningful life. ●

'Collective rather than individualistic strategies out of illness are needed to create equity, giving people what they need, when they need it'



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Imtaz Khaliq MBACP (Accred), MBE has worked in the NHS for five years, currently for NHS Tower Hamlets Talking Therapies. She also lectures on self-compassion for the postgraduate diploma in counselling, and on counselling for psychology undergraduates, both at the University of Westminster. imtaz.com