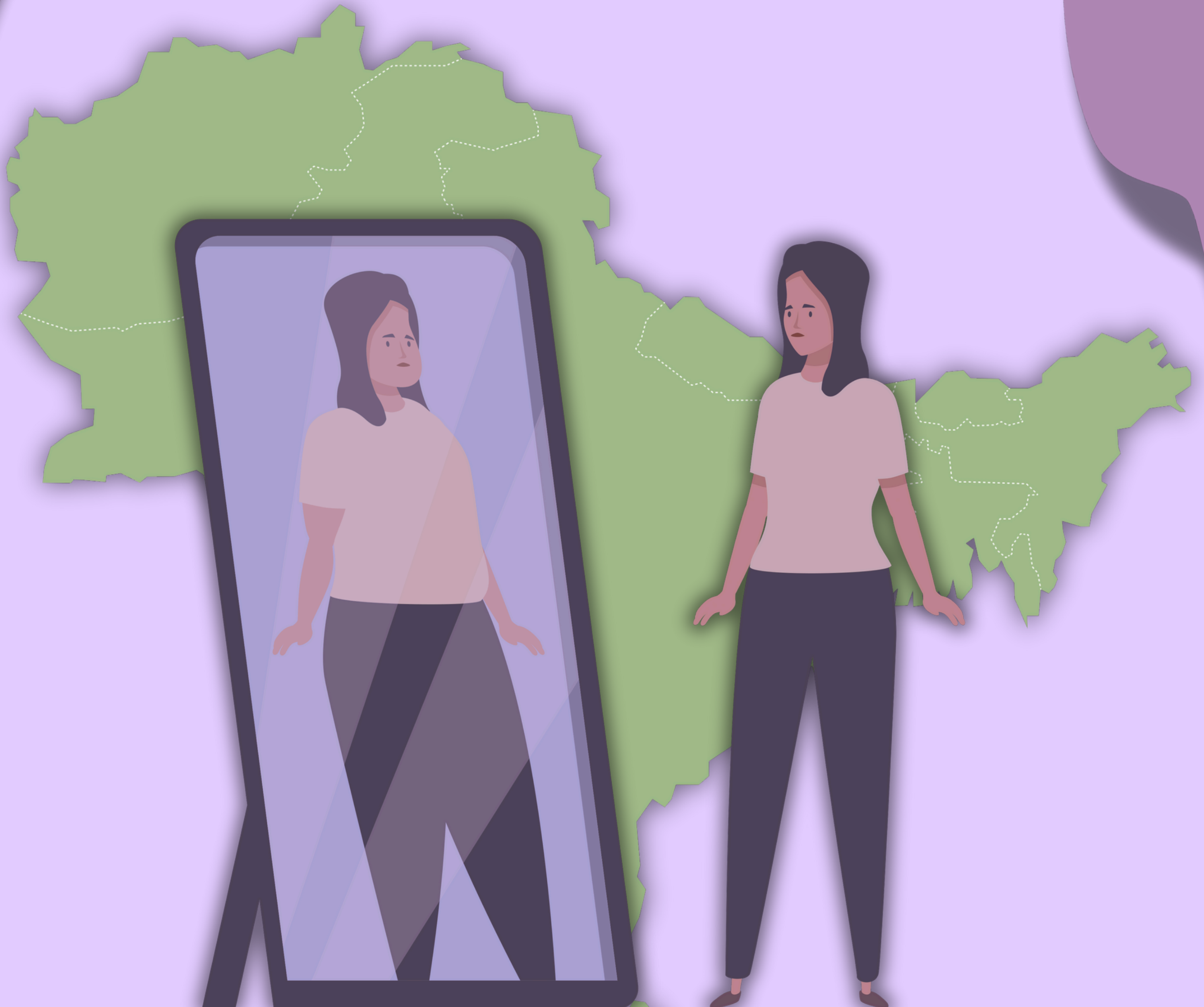


Eating Disorders in the South Asian Culture

EATING
DISORDER
SUPPORT &
AWARENESS

Project EDSA
Resource Library
*for individuals in
recovery*

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Overview of Eating Disorders and Signs to Watch Out For

Eating disorders (EDs) are serious mental health conditions **characterized by unhealthy relationships with food and body image**. They affect people of all backgrounds, including the **South Asian community**, but often go unrecognized due to cultural stigma and misunderstanding. Early detection of eating disorders is crucial because they can lead to severe physical and emotional consequences if left untreated. **Recognizing common signs such as drastic weight changes, secretive eating, mood swings, and social withdrawal** can help individuals get timely support.

1. Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia is marked by **extreme food restriction, intense fear of gaining weight**, and a distorted body image. Though commonly associated with weight loss, some individuals may appear to be within a "normal" weight range but still suffer from dangerous internal symptoms.

- Obsessive calorie counting or avoidance of meals
- Extreme weight loss or not making expected weight gains based on age.
- Being very tired and weak.
- Dizziness or fainting.
- Swelling of the arms or legs.

2. Bulimia Nervosa

Bulimia involves **repeated episodes of binge eating** followed by purging through vomiting, laxatives, or excessive exercise. People with bulimia may maintain a normal weight, making the disorder harder to detect.

- Weight change or fluctuations in weight.
- Dental erosion, bad breath.
- Swelling around the cheeks and jaw.
- Indigestion, frequent constipation, diarrhoea or new food intolerances.

3. Binge Eating Disorder (BED)

BED is characterized by **recurring episodes of eating large quantities of food without purging**. It is often linked to emotional distress and is the most common eating disorder globally, including in South Asia.

- Eating in secret or when not hungry
- Feeling out of control during episodes
- Frequent feelings of shame, guilt, or depression after eating
- Noticeable weight fluctuations
- Avoidance of meals with others

<https://www.cepip.org/article/cultural-differences-eating-disorders-particular-emphasis-british-south-asian-communities>

The Cultural Pressures in South Asian Families

South Asian families often **emphasize appearance, especially for women, and place high importance on academic and professional achievement**. These cultural values can increase stress and contribute to disordered eating behaviors as coping mechanisms. **Traditional gender roles and stigma around mental health** discourage open discussion about emotional struggles, including eating disorders. Additionally, eating disorders are often **misunderstood or dismissed as “Western” problems**, which can delay recognition and treatment within the community (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023; Karasz et al., 2019).

Barriers to Getting Help

Many South Asians facing eating disorders encounter **barriers when seeking help**. **Mental health stigma and fear of bringing shame** to the family often prevent individuals from disclosing their struggles. Healthcare providers may misdiagnose or overlook symptoms **due to cultural differences or lack of training in cultural competence**. Language barriers and limited access to culturally relevant services also reduce treatment options. Additionally, fear of discrimination or cultural insensitivity can discourage help-seeking (Goel et al., 2022; NEDA, 2024).

Support Tips for Youth and Families

1. Normalize Conversations about Mental Health

Encourage open and non-judgmental communication about **food, body image, and emotions within the family**. Normalizing mental health discussions can help reduce shame and support early intervention.

2. Educate Yourself and Become More Aware

Learning about eating disorders helps **break down harmful myths and misconceptions**, especially in cultures where mental health is rarely discussed. Individuals and families can **better support loved ones and challenge stigma in their communities** if they are more educated on how to combat it. *Being aware is the first step toward change.*



3. Create a Supportive Home Environment

A home that encourages open conversations, kindness, and respect for all body types can make **a big difference for someone struggling with an eating disorder**. Avoid making negative comments about food, weight, or appearance. Instead, focus on promoting balanced habits, self-worth, and emotional well-being. A safe and understanding environment **builds trust and helps healing begin**.

Culturally Relevant Resources

South Asian Mental Health Alliance (SAMHA)

SAMHA provides **education, advocacy, and resources specifically focused on improving mental health outcomes for South Asians**. Their website offers culturally grounded information, community programs, and peer support.

National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA)

NEDA offers **helplines, toolkits, and educational resources about eating disorders**. Their diversity and inclusion resources acknowledge cultural differences and provide guidance for families and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds.

Project HEAL

Project HEAL **supports access to eating disorder treatment for underserved communities**. They offer treatment grants, peer mentorship programs, and provider directories that include culturally competent care options.



Goel, N., Thomas, B., Boutte, R., Kaur, B., & Mazzeo, S. (2022). Asian American J Psychology, 14(1), 96-113. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000271>

Karasz A., Gany, F., Escobar, J., Flores, C., Prasad, L., et al. (2019). Mental Health and Stress among South Asians. J Immigr Minor Health, 21(1), 7-14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-016-0501-4>

National Eating Disorders Association. (2024). What are the Different Types Eating Disorders? Retrieved from <https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/types-eating-disorders>

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2023). Mental Health Outreach to the South Asian Community. Retrieved from <https://www.nami.org/mmham/mental-health-outreach-to-the-south-asian-community/>



Project EDSA is a youth-led initiative driven by the belief that everyone deserves space, support, and acceptance. Our mission is to build support spaces so anyone, anywhere, can access the resources, education, and freedom to have their voice heard.

Through storytelling, education, and free resources, we're building a world where every voice is heard and every story matters

This resource is a part of Project EDSA's Resource Library.

This is a growing collection of research-backed, student-created guides, tools, and support links designed to support mental health and eating disorder recovery. If there's a topic you'd like us to cover or if you're interested in creating a resource yourself, please feel free to let us know!

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