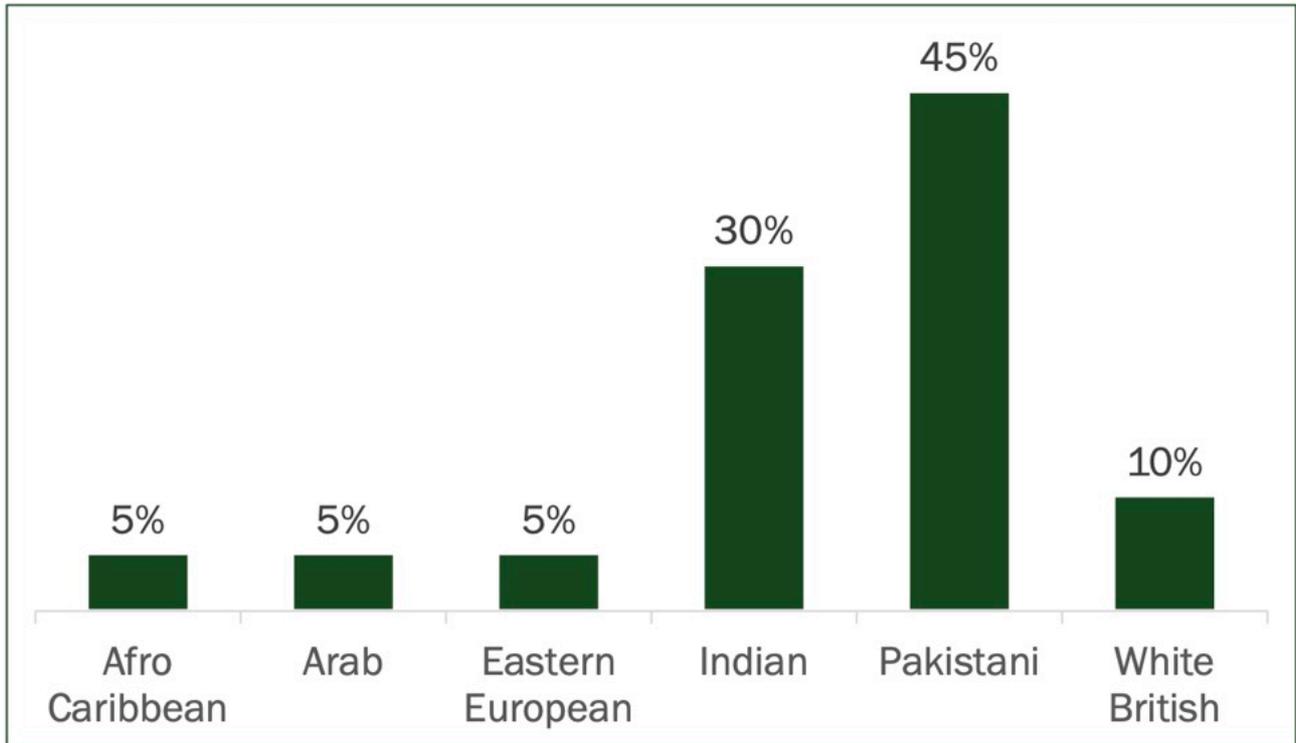


A close-up photograph of a person wearing a white, textured shawl. Their hands are pressed against their forehead, suggesting a state of distress, grief, or prayer. The background is bright and out of focus.

# **TRAUMA, TEARS AND TREADMILLS: FINDING HEALING THROUGH FAITH**

**DECEMBER 2024**

## Ethnicity of Participants



## Event Overview:

Sabbiyah Pervez shared her journey in dealing with cancer connecting with local women and making them feel comfortable and confident to discuss this delicate topic, that the community rarely confronts and discusses.

Sabbiyah is a Senior Investigations Reporter at BBC Yorkshire with 10 years of experience in Broadcasting including a year at BBC Panorama. She is also a trustee for the City of Culture 2025. Sabbiyah has 3 children, a cat and a husband who has been handcuffed to her for the past 17 years. When Sabbiyah's sister died suddenly last year, consumed by the mental health issues that had affected her, Sabbiyah realised she had to make a dramatic change in the way she was living her life. Now, a year on, she shares her journey with us. Sabbiyah will be talking about mental health, finding yourself, stepping into your skin and drawing bold lines that can be rubbed out, but you hold the rubber and the red pen.

## Sabbiyah's Story:

She presented the following:

I was born into a loving and close-knit family, and from a young age, I grew up with a deep sense of responsibility and connection to my loved ones. I've always been an extrovert, someone who thrives in social settings and naturally brings people together. My sister, on the other hand, was my opposite, a quiet, introspective soul who carried her emotions privately. Despite our differences, the bond between us was unshakable.

She was a devoted mother to four beautiful children. Compassionate and caring, she always prioritized the well-being of her family yet struggled to share her own burdens. Over time, her reserved nature hid a growing storm of mental health challenges that eventually became too much to bear.

*It was a Friday morning, and I went to visit her, as I often did. We spoke briefly, and I promised to return after prayers. I had no idea it would be the last time I would see her alive. That afternoon, the call came. Her mother-in-law said they couldn't find her. Moments later, the devastating truth emerged: she had been found after attempting to take her own life. As we rushed to the hospital, the gravity of the situation became painfully clear. A doctor called with the words that broke me: "She's not going to make it. You need to come." My world collapsed in that moment, but I knew I had to stay strong for the sake of my family. My parents were performing Umrah at the time, thousands of miles away, and I felt the weight of holding everything together. At the hospital, I saw my sister for the last time. The room felt heavy, and I could sense the presence of the angel of death. In that sacred and heartbreaking moment, I turned to prayer, asking Allah for mercy for her soul. My prayers didn't stop, even as she took her final breath.*



In the days that followed, the grief was overwhelming. Telling her children that their mother was gone was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

But even in my pain, I found strength in my faith. On the night of the funeral, I sat on my prayer mat at 4 a.m. and began listing everything I was grateful for: the support of my family, the blessings of my parents' prayers from the holy land, and the promise I made to be there for her children.

On the day of the funeral, I made a vow, to always seek light, even in darkness. I woke up for Fajr and prayed, and I haven't missed a single one since. That commitment to prayer became a cornerstone of my healing and my journey forward.

My sister's passing lit a fire inside me. As I reflected on the stigma surrounding mental health in our community, I began to see how much she had suffered in silence. Looking back, it seemed her struggles began with postnatal depression. But because of cultural taboos and fear of judgment, she never sought help.

At first, our family chose to keep the circumstances of her death private. I understood why, but in my heart, I knew I had to speak the truth. When people asked, I answered honestly. I was determined to break the silence around mental health.

In my grief, I encountered others who had lost loved ones to suicide but felt too afraid to share their stories. Some had been forced to pretend their loved ones had died of natural causes. I realized how deeply this silence hurt and how widespread the stigma really was.

In the year that followed, I channelled my grief into action. I began learning about mental health, its complexities, how it affects people differently, and how crucial it is to talk about it. I found comfort and strength in prayer and physical fitness. These became my anchors as I took on the responsibility of raising not just my own children, but my sister's four as well.

Her passing changed my life forever, but it also became a turning point. Grief stripped away all that was unimportant. I no longer found meaning in material things. What mattered now was faith, family, and a commitment to care for others with compassion and understanding.

This journey has become one of advocacy and hope. I speak openly about the importance of mental health in our communities and urge others to lead with kindness rather than judgment. I remind people of Allah's mercy, mental illness is a heavy burden, and those who suffer are not forsaken by their Creator.

My message is simple: struggling with mental health is not a reflection of someone's faith or character. It is an illness that needs support, care, and love. By breaking the stigma, I hope to build a world where no one feels they have to suffer in silence.

Today, I continue to honour my sister's memory by raising her children with love and creating a stable, nurturing home. My faith remains my

foundation, and prayer and gratitude are constants in my life. This story, my story, is one of resilience, built on the belief that even in our darkest moments, there is always light.



To those who hear it, I offer this message: “To Allah we belong, and to Him we return. Let us walk through life with compassion and understanding, so that no one feels alone in their struggles.”

## Q and A:

Following the presentation, we had a Q and A:

- **You have gone through a lot and had to unpack a lot of things. Where did you start?**

I realised I need to change the way I am living. All the boxes fill up and it catches up on you. So, I went to therapy. I never thought I would but after 2 weeks I called a Muslim therapist and started counselling. I needed help to feel the pain as I'm too scared to feel it. It's the best thing I have done. I also got the children counselling. Seek help.

- **What can we do to help somebody with mental health issues who doesn't want to be helped?**

We cannot save someone who doesn't want to be helped; change must come from within them. While we can offer support, the ultimate choice is theirs, whether it's about overcoming challenges like smoking or other negative habits. Additionally, it reminds us to prioritize self-care, as we cannot effectively support others if we are emotionally or physically exhausted.

- **How can we talk about mental health in our families without feeling like we're going against our culture or religion?**

Seeking help is not a sign of weak faith, but an act of courage and self-care. Islam encourages compassion, healing, and community support, and ignoring mental illness only causes more harm. Our culture may not always understand it, but our faith has room for it.

## Feedback:

The presentation deeply resonated with the diverse group of women who attended. They praised the honesty, emotional depth, and cultural relevance of the speaker's story, particularly around themes of mental health, grief, spirituality, and resilience. The session sparked reflection, encouraged open dialogue, and fostered a shared commitment to breaking the silence surrounding mental health within ethnic and faith communities.

The key themes from the feedback were:

- **Breaking the Stigma Around Mental Health:** Many women shared that this was the first time they had heard suicide and mental illness addressed so openly and sensitively within a cultural or faith-based context.
- **Faith as a Source of Healing:** The integration of prayer, grief, and spiritual growth was highlighted as one of the most impactful aspects of the presentation. Several attendees expressed a renewed or deepened connection to their faith practices as a result.
- **Validation of Lived Experiences:** Numerous participants related personally to the themes of postnatal depression, silent suffering, and familial responsibility. The speaker's vulnerability encouraged them to reflect on their own journeys and those of women in their lives.

Comments from the event include:

"I lost my cousin to suicide last year, and until today, I felt like I had to hide it. Thank you for giving us permission to speak the truth."

"I cried when you said your sister's struggles began after childbirth. I had postpartum depression too, but I suffered in silence. Thank you for naming it."

"As someone who's not Muslim, I found the spiritual side of your story really grounding. Prayer as a form of healing- what a powerful thing."

"I relate to the silence around mental health. Where I'm from, we're also told to be strong and keep quiet. Your voice gave me hope."

"You reminded me of the verse: 'Verily, with hardship comes ease.' Thank you for showing us that ease can begin with honesty."

## Conclusion

As a result of this event, we realised the following community needs:

- **Mental Health Education:** Strong interest was expressed in workshops focused on understanding and supporting mental health from culturally and faith-sensitive perspectives.

- **Youth & Maternal Mental Health Support:** Participants highlighted a need for safe spaces for young women and mothers, especially around postnatal mental health.
- **Faith-Based Collaboration:** Attendees suggested involving local imams, female scholars, and community leaders in future events to amplify reach and address religious misconceptions around suicide and mental illness.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Many women asked for follow-up sessions or support groups to stay connected and continue the conversation beyond the event.

**Report created by the Tea & Chat participants  
supported by the MWC Team**

