



YOUR VOICE

With Claire Alison Hams

It is good to talk

A POSITIVE shift continues to occur as awareness increases around the vital need to address not only physical wellbeing, but also mental and emotional health. There is now a return from conventional modern medicine to the more holistic approach of our ancestors. The talking therapies profession is working hard to address issues we have avoided for so long due to stigma, taboo and shame.

The desire to hide anything deemed 'less than perfect' in our lives has passed down through generations with a message, which loudly says, 'don't talk about topics that could bring the family name into disrepute'. These could be serious issues such as depression, anxiety, traumas and various types of abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual and domestic. This applies to all cultures, but keeping silence is perhaps more prevalent in the Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

I recently learned a phrase in Punjabi that translates into 'what will people say', and it is frequently used to control behaviour, speech, and life choices, which might be felt to be offensive to the community.

There is support available and more people from all backgrounds are seeing the benefits of this. Importantly, talking therapies are evolving. It is no longer someone lying on a couch, with a therapist nodding coldly as they speak.

There are now counsellors from all cultural backgrounds and you can choose one who works in a way you find most beneficial. As a counsellor, I am passionate about supporting everyone, including my BAME clients, and am open to discussing any topics. Bringing issues into a safe confidential space creates the freedom to explore in a way that someone in need may never have done before. That space created by a therapist allows you to explore your thoughts and feelings without fear of judgement. In that confidential space, you can tell your counsellor things you may not have ever told anyone in your whole life, and with the knowledge they will sit with you through painful and difficult feelings and emotions.

Counsellors work to a code of ethics, which places the client at the centre, and it doesn't always have to be face to face (although this is preferred). If getting to a weekly appointment is difficult, you can now communicate with a counsellor on the phone, by Skype or message.

There are several directories you can use to find a counsellor safely. Make sure the counsellors are part of a membership organisation, which ensures they are suitably qualified and practicing ethically. Most membership organisations that counsellors join are a part of the PSA (professional standards authority).

Your counsellor should also be insured and have a GDPR agreement that they share with you about, if and how they store your personal information. You have a right to ask about all these things. Don't feel that you have to stay with the first counsellor you try a session with. If you don't feel comfortable, try another. Counselling is all about the relationship with your therapist and it's vital you feel ok. We are all individuals and counsellors know that and want you to choose someone right for you. Remember, counselling is an investment into yourself and you might be surprised how life changing it can be.

Claire Alison Hams is a London-based counsellor trained in a psychodynamic approach. Visit Instagram: @clairealisonhams and for further help visit www.bacp.co.uk, www.nationalcounsellingsociety.org, www.mcapn.co.uk and www.counselling-directory.org.uk

'It was a rollercoaster of triumphs and disasters'

PRIYA O'SHEA RECALLS HER TIME ON TV'S BAKE OFF



SWEET TREAT: Priya O'Shea; and (left inset) with the other *The Great British Bake Off* contestants

by PRIYA MULJI

HIT TV show *The Great British Bake Off* is so popular that just participating in it is like a win and one contestant who impressed on the most recent series was Priya O'Shea.

The Leicester-based mother of two and marketing consultant battled through a number of challenges to reach the sixth week of the show before being eliminated. The 34-year-old, who first experienced baking with an after-school club at primary school, has seen her profile sky-rocket since the show and is now looking forward to doing more in the baking space along with completing her first novel. *Eastern Eye* caught up with Priya O'Shea to talk about her *The Great British Bake Off* journey, cooking tips and future plans.

What first connected you to baking?

I grew up in a family where we always shared food with friends, including packing our guests off with things or sending a plate round to the neighbours. And I loved that about baking. It's so wonderful when someone brings a cake into work or you drop some freshly baked biscuits off to friends. It gives me a lot of pleasure, and I also love learning new skills. You can never be a master of all things baking, as there is always more to learn and I really enjoy that.

What drew you towards *The Great British Bake Off* show?

It's a show I've watched for many years and loved. When my mother-in-law gifted me with a kitchen-aid as a wedding present, I started baking a lot. I thought about applying for *Bake Off* in 2012, but decided against it. So it had been on my mind for years and something I always thought about. I finally applied for the show in 2018, but didn't make it, but kept working on my baking with the goal of trying one more time. And to my delight, I made it.

What was the experience like?

It was a rollercoaster of highs, lows, triumphs and baking disasters. But it's been such a privilege to be a part of, and I've made some incredible new friendships, which has by far been the best thing about it. It was stressful at times because you're pushing yourself to do the best you can, but incredibly rewarding when a bake you've practised so many times is loved by the judges. It's a really proud moment.

What was the most challenging aspect?

For even the most confident baker, some of the challenges test not just your baking skills, but also your ability to multi-task, to be creative and manage multiple things under time pressure - while also talking to the camera, and wanting to run over to help your fellow baker when they've had an almighty disaster. There is a lot going on, which is of course a challenge but as soon as the challenge time is over, we were back outside

throwing a lemon around like a ball or looking at ducklings and having a good laugh together in the most beautiful country setting.

Have your baking skills improved now?

My skills have improved massively. I had to bake so much during the practice, so things that I'd have found daunting in the past, I'd be doing several times a day until they were perfect. I wasn't confident making mousses, bavaresis, curds and jellies, but I'd do them in a flash now if I had to.

How competitive were you before going on the show and did that increase?

Bake Off is an unusual competition in that it doesn't feel at all like a competition. We're in a very unique experience together that we become such close friends in a very short amount of time. I'm quite competitive with myself in that I get really frustrated if something isn't as good as I know I can make it. At home, if something isn't perfect I've been known to make it again several times, until I'm completely satisfied.

What has the experience of being in the public and press eye been like?

It's a strange thing when you see yourself trending on Twitter. *Bake Off* is such a hugely popular show so there is an incredible amount of social media commentary

about it. People are incredibly supportive, and it's wonderful to see those messages, or those from people saying they've been inspired by something you may have done or said - that really is special. I get stopped often by people who recognise me, and if I'm with another baker or two, we're very quickly spotted. People are always so friendly and only have nice things to say.

What about any negativity?

We have all also had negative comments on social media, but I am pretty happy ignoring those. If they haven't actually eaten my bakes, I can't take their comments seriously.

What has been the most memorable moment from *The Great British Bake Off* journey?

There have been many such moments. The first time I met the other bakers when we arrived in London, it felt like things were finally starting. The first time we stepped into the tent was exciting.

What is the secret of great baking?

Well, it's actually no secret at all, just practise. Things can always go wrong for the most experienced bakers. The most important thing is to understand why things went wrong, and you'll only get that with practise.

Can you give us some cooking tips?

Get an oven thermometer. All ovens are different and some are more accurate than others. An oven thermometer makes sure you know exactly what temperature you're baking at. Be mindful of your butter temperature - if it says softened, use softened. It does make a difference to the bake and the mixture. Finally, it sounds simple, but weigh properly. You can wing it with some recipes for certain ingredients but with others, the extra gram here or there will make a difference. I've baked for years, so I've got lots of different tips for baking different things, and it's hard to pick a few generic ones, but oven temperature is everything.

Are there any key tips for beginners?

Start with something simple and nail it. You'll learn so much from trial and error, and it'll help build your confidence for more elaborate bakes.

What delicacies do you enjoy baking and cooking the most?

Bread and pastry are things I really enjoy. I enjoy savoury bakes more than I do sweet ones. That said, I do make loaf cakes more than anything else as they are so quick and easy, and perfect with tea.

Who are your own cooking heroes?

I have so many. I love Ottolenghi for his flavourful dishes and Meera Sodha's recipes are exactly like my mother's, but they are better explained (mothers do not do measures!). Felicity Cloake has a brilliant approach to recipes and is often my go-to when I am trying something new. I have more than 50 cookbooks, so actually for me, this list could go on and on. I should also add that my mother and many of my aunts are actually quite phenomenal cooks, and I am quite in awe of them sometimes too.

What are your future plans?

I am half way through writing my novel so finishing that is certainly a priority, and I look forward to sharing that when it's finished. Beyond that, we shall wait and see. I love all things food and baking so I'd love to keep sharing my passion for that.