

**Wellness in Color:** Healing Through Community

**Interview Guest:** Geetanjali Mittal

**Interviewer:** Maritza Steele

**Hosted by:** Caroline Ludy

**Produced by:** Brian Joust

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**Geetanjali (Geet):** I would say that talking about mental health reinforces, in my mind at least, that I have to take care of myself and that it's important to take care of ourselves and we can take care of ourselves.

**Intro - Brian:** Welcome to Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast produced by NAMI Minnesota the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Wellness in Color is a podcast series that explores perspectives on mental health to reshape the cultural language of mental illness. NAMI Minnesota is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the lives of children and adults with mental illnesses and their families. Visit NAMI Minnesota online at [namimn.org](http://namimn.org). Subscribe to the podcast and listen to more episodes on the NAMI Minnesota website or wherever you get your podcasts. For Wellness in Color episodes, you can expect your usual host to be NAMI Minnesota staff member Caroline Ludy on this episode you will hear Caroline along with her co-host Maritza Steele who handles most of the interview with our guest, Geetanjali. Maritza is a member of the NAMI Minnesota Multicultural Young Adult Advisory Board, and now here's Caroline.

**Caroline:** Welcome to Wellness in Color. Before I introduce our very first guest, Geetanjali Mittal and guest host, Maritza Steele, I would like to share how Wellness in Color began. Our Multicultural Young Adult Advisory Board helps NAMI Minnesota in providing education and outreach to build positive relationships with Minnesota's multicultural communities. Over the past year, board members have engaged in discussions of their personal experiences and those of their community when seeking understanding or help for their mental illness. Many of the discussions revealed the discrimination that community members faced in their search for information or help. A little bit about our guest, Geetanjali. An educator artist in internationally published researcher. Geetanjali shares her Wellness in Color story about living with postpartum depression and her road to mental wellness after immigration to the United States. Originally from India, Geet grew up in a variety of cities and has a deep appreciation for different cultures. Before coming to the U.S. she taught postgraduate English literature at Punjab University. A strong advocate for social justice, Geet is currently studying community health at Normandale College. These efforts were supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health Award. No. UL1TR002494. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

**Caroline:** Maritza, take it away.

**Maritza:** Thank you Caroline. Good morning, Geet. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

**Geet:** Yeah. Good morning.

**Maritza:** I just wanted to ask you, just to get the ball rolling: what does healthy mean to you?

**Geet:** For me healthy is a balance in your life which is I know pretty hard to achieve these days but definitely something when you feel mentally healthy, physically healthy, and spiritually healthy too. And it's a state where you are happy and you think that you can have control over some of the things that you want to do you can organize your life and lead a life that you want to. Sometimes it won't happen but at least you'll know that you have tried and you don't feel bad about it and you keep on going.

**Maritza:** Okay. Thank you for that. And you talked about maintaining this kind of balance in terms of being healthy. How do you go about that?

**Geet:** Yeah like I said it's not an easy task because every day there are circumstances that you may not have foreseen. There are things that may happen. Sometimes it's your own physical health that might come in between. Sometimes it's your state of mind, your mental health, that might interfere. To maintain that balance physically you should be in a good health. So that is the first thing to do I would say. But at the same time you should also be mentally healthy. You should have a good state of mind about yourself. You should value yourself which is pretty important. And when you value yourself you know what you want from your life and you can make an effort to achieve that. So to maintain that balance it's really important to know your own self, to know what you want and how you can achieve it. And once you make an effort towards that side you know you can achieve it and you'll make an effort and you'll definitely go towards that even if you fail. Sometimes you would keep on moving because that's your dream. So once you have a dream you'll definitely move towards that and to maintain that balance it's more like to take control of your health physically and also to work on your mental health at the same time. And I will also add that spiritual health is equally important, as far as I'm concerned, because once you have faith it helps heal. And it also helps in your mental state of mind because then you are not afraid of the coming circumstances and you feel that you can do what you want to do. There might be events. There might be things that might be coming into your way but definitely you'll keep on going.

**Maritza:** Thank you so much for that. I want to continue talking about what kinds of resources you personally use in order to maintain or help yourself in your journey towards continuing wellness.

**Geet:** I am from India. India has a rich background of spiritual resources I would say so definitely that is one important thing in my life, and it's a community based society. So I have lots of friends who are always there for me so my first resource I would say that as my family was always very supportive my husband, my kids, my mother-in-law, my parents I talk to them. I keep in healthy contact with them even if my parents are in India I talk to them almost every day so that I know they are well and I share my experiences. I take guidance from them. I talk to my friends regularly. So that is really important to me to keep in touch with people who I admire, whom I adore, and who understand me. So that's my first resource. The second one is I try to do what I like and I put in my most effort into doing the things that I enjoy the most. And reading is one of those things. Sometimes I get some time to do art. So I do that. I think hobbies help us a lot because these are things we enjoy and when we enjoy something we get time for that. It's not always easy to do that but definitely we can set aside some time and that always helps for me. Those songs and music helped me a lot.

**Maritza:** Yeah. It's really wonderful to hear about a sense of community kind of building you up and helping you to continue moving forward in your journey with wellness. It's also been nice to hear about the different ways that you go about self-care. You know a lot of times we hear about self-care in the news we read different articles and we hear about it but it can be as simple as just doing things that you

like; things that can help you to relax and just enjoy the moment that you're currently in. I wanted to ask if you have any specific wellness goals at the moment?

**Geet:** Yes definitely. Right now I am studying community health certification course at Normandale Community College. So that has brought me pretty close to what I want to do with my life to help people around me. And for that it's really important that I should be well myself. So I think that has brought me close to what my goals were. One of the assignments that we were given was about how healthy you think you are and how healthy you think you want to be. So I think that brought me pretty close to the thinking that I should be working more on my health. So right now my wellness goals I would say would be to have a better healthy self, physically. And the second most important thing for me would be to have good mental health where I'm happy because if I'm happy I can spread happiness around me. If I'm content I can tell people that life is not that bad it's difficult I would say but it's worth fighting for. And I would also say that if you are mentally well you can take care of others as well because it's really important. Like in my family we have this saying my husband always quotes that that you need the oxygen mask for yourself first; only then you can help others. So my wellness goal would be to have a very healthy mental health. To have good mental health, to be happy, to be relaxed and put in my best effort in whatever I'm doing.

**Maritza:** Yeah so I found it very interesting that you kind of started that answer with talking about how part of your wellness goals have to do with helping other people to achieve or see that they can achieve wellness. I think that it is definitely important that you realize that there is this physical component and also a mental component to that wellness and it's very inspiring to see that someone is working in the field or trying to get into the field and also being very open about how they're trying to move through getting towards wellness and maintaining wellness.

**Geet:** Yeah definitely. Thank you Maritza. And one important thing in my life happened when I came to the U.S. My first child, my son was born in 2013 and I had always been told motherhood is great. Nobody ever told me it's going to be difficult as well. And when I was in India I had seen many families where people were taking care of each other and new moms had a lot more support. And when I came here it was really difficult for me to understand why I have to take care of my child on my own because I didn't have that kind of support around me so it was really difficult for me to kind of understand and do everything on my own. I had a lot of anxiety. I went into postpartum depression which I couldn't identify myself. Luckily my husband saw the signs and then he told me that you should go to a counselor. And when I went to the counselor I realized that mental health is really, really important because I was not enjoying something which I was looking forward to. And with the help of the counselor I think it took me around five or six sessions with her over the period of three months and that helped me a lot and that changed my life perspective and then I realized mental health is really important before that because I had not seen anyone talking about that much in India in my family. So I wasn't that aware I would say. And then I realized that it is really important that mental health should be considered important and people should be made aware about that and with the birth of my daughter, the second time, I was already prepared that it was going to be difficult. So thankfully I was aware and I had support. I was lucky in that sense so that helped me a lot. But that year made me realize the importance of counselors in our life. The importance of mental health and also that people need to be made aware so we shouldn't be kind of pushing it away or under the carpet. It's not just a phase. It's a pain that somebody is going through. It's a stress somebody is going through which they need to talk about and share and I think sharing helps a lot. It's not that easy to talk to people because there is always a stigma that I may not be considered a normal human being or I'm not normal. But that's a part of it. Like in one of the NAMI sessions which I attended there was this important talk that if

somebody has some kind of [physical] illness they would talk about that, but when it comes to mental illness people, are always afraid most of the time it's like I may be considered like we say in quotes "crazy." So that's the fear that people have and because of that they don't share their feelings even if they are not feeling well which I would say it's not good. That's what I did initially because I was thinking maybe I'm not doing something right. So that was that stigma in the back of my mind that I shouldn't be talking about it. But once I started talking I think it was all taken away and I was able to enjoy my life in a better way. So since then it has been really very important in my life. So the moment I feel anxious I'm like I have to take care of myself. So that's the first thing that comes to mind. So I think it's really important that we should be talking more about the mental health not just as a simple thing. It's very crucial. It's the basis of your life. If you're mentally healthy I think you can enjoy everything else in life. It's intertwined into every kind of health we have mental health. It is a part of everyday every single second that we are living I would say.

**Caroline:** So if I could interject here you said get that community is one of your resources. How specifically were you able to have the community support in terms of your recovery [living with] postpartum depression?

**Geet:** Yes it did. It did. Like I was going to the counselor, but at the same time I needed support from within the family. My family helped me a lot and my friends would be visiting me. They would be talking to me and then I would go out and I'll talk to people that helped me because once you are talking to moms like you're like 'Okay! They are also going through the same thing.' So I'm not thinking something weird and I'm not thinking something that is out of the box. So every mother goes through that and it may vary in kind of. I would say some people feel it more, some people feel it less. But definitely there's always a lot more expectations from our own selves as mothers. We want to do a lot. So when you talk to other mothers you know that they are also struggling so this is not something that is just unique to you. Everyone is trying their best. Sometimes you get some really good tips from some moms like I got a really good tip that one of the mothers told me that helped me a lot. [The advice I was given was to] take some kind of musical instrument or use something musical around your son when he's going to bed and he'll get used to it. And I got a mobile which was playing music so every evening around 6 or 6:30 p.m. I would start playing that when I would put him to bed. And it helped a lot. Within five minutes he would be sleeping so whenever that music would start he knew that he has to go to bed and he would sleep. So that was one example of a tip that I got. And then also take time for yourself which I was not doing so self-care was one thing that other moms made me realize I need to do. So that resource was really really great. Reaching out to community. Taking help is not bad. I realized at that moment. Otherwise before that it was like 'You can do it and you should do it alone because it is your responsibility.' But I never realized that sometimes we do need support. We need help and we should be asking for it and it is there when you ask for it. It's not that you won't be getting help so there were moms who were helping me. There were friends who were helping me so that resource helped me a lot.

**Caroline:** Thank you. As a mother myself I do appreciate you say that we should ask for support because a lot of times we again today's society it's just that as you said before this me. There are so many expectations heaped upon you. In addition to motherhood that yes, it's kind of critical that if you don't ask for support then you know that you can of course put yourself in jeopardy. You also want to ensure that your child is cared for as well so I appreciate those comments. Thank you.

**Geet:** Thank you.

**Caroline:** Maritza, go ahead. Go ahead.

**Maritza:** Thank you Caroline for that interjection. I am not currently a mother and so I'm not really well versed in postpartum depression or those kinds of changes outside of textbook material. But yes it's definitely really important to acknowledge those changes, to know that they exist, and also get support.

**Geet:** Yes I agree definitely.

**Maritza:** I wanted to comment on you talking about the importance of community for you and your wellness and a little bit about how that community aspect that was very important to you kind of shifted when you came to the U.S. You said that family was pretty important. Did you find any other resources to kind of guide you through your mental wellness journey? Initially when you realized there was something you know a little bit different?

**Geet:** Yeah. When I came here I just got married after ten days of coming here and then a month later I realized I was expecting my first child. So it was kind of a lot more changes when I came here. It's a different culture. It's a completely different environment and I came in November so there was for the first time in my life I had seen so much of snow. So again it was the weather as well. It was the people, the language, the culture, so there was so many things and a new family. So and on top of that I was going to be a mother. So there was I was changing physically I was in a different environment mentally physically and also culturally. So there was a lot of change in my life which was kind of difficult to handle. But again like community has always been an important part to me. So I tried to contact my friends who had been in India. I tried to make new friends here and some have been really good help in talking about different cultures I have a few American friends which are always talking about like they understand me well and they do appreciate the way I think. And they also correct me which I really appreciate because that's my perspective is different coming from a different culture. So I am still learning and we are all learners all through our lives so I'm learning and they help me to understand what is happening why it is happening and I get to know different perspectives so that helps me a lot. So community, reaching out to friends was one major resource and then again like I mentioned spiritual health is really important to me. So I would meditate a little bit sometimes whenever I could sit and meditate I would I do that. I would listen to hymns, that helped me a lot. Music has been very important part in my life in that sense. So sometimes I'll try to draw I'll go out and try to attend some events in the library sometimes or maybe meet people there. But networking was not happening the way that it is happening after five years of my staying here because I was a little bit shy and hesitant so it took some time but it definitely helped. So going out and meeting people contacting my friends talking to people who I had faith in helped me a lot.

**Maritza:** Yeah. So it sounds like both that community aspect and the spiritual aspects for you seemed to help a lot both mentally and with your physical health getting encouragement for that and but in addition it seems like you can correct me if I'm wrong, it also helped you to get a new perspective and start to change your viewpoints, starting to destigmatize mental health mental wellness and help you on a path to wellness.

**Geet:** Yes definitely that did, you're correct Maritza and I would again emphasize the importance of talking to the counselors if you are going and meeting a counselor you're not crazy I would say that no stigma should be attached to it because just like other illnesses brain as a part of our body. So it has an illness. It needs to be cured. It's not just a phase. It's something that needs to be taken care off. And if you're going and talking to a counselor you are taking care of your brain just like any other body part

just like you have diabetes you take insulin because you want to be healthy you want to be going on and working and do what you want to do. So just like that if you are having something that is bothering you if you are anxious if you're depressed and with modern lifestyle things have changed so much. There's a lot more expectations from every individual. Even we have a lot more expectations from ourselves. So we need to take care of our mental health if you need to create a good balanced environment around us good society around us we need to take care of our mental health initially because it's the building block I would say it's the foundation of everything. If you are mentally well you can enjoy and you can spread happiness like I mentioned before. So it's really important that we take care of our health and we need if we need to go to counselor. I think it's not a bad thing. There shouldn't be any stigma attached to it. Talk to people find resources NAMI is one really good resource which I came to know when I was doing community health certification. They used to talk about that and I'm really glad that I could find that kind of a place and I read their website there's a lot more information this you talk about any kind of mental illness and you'll find it there a whole detail of that. It's always there to help you out. You can call and you can get help if you want to. So that's really important resource that I would like to talk about to people.

**Maritza:** Thank you so much for that. And the NAMI plug as well. I appreciate it.

(All laugh)

**Caroline:** And I have another question to ask you Geet. You said before that you grew up in India. Now the transition to the USA was not the smoothest that you had expected. Now that you know you're talking more you said about mental health in particular, you lived with postpartum depression, how has your outlook, I guess transition from India to the U.S; how has that conversation changed?

**Geet:** Oh yes. That's another part. As an immigrant I would say it was not easy and I think many of the other people who have come from different countries over here whether there's they have been forced to flee or whether they have come here by choice. It's not an easy thing because I would just interject a small story here which I talk about to my friends a lot and we had talk about immigration and changes that people have to go through when they come to a different country or different place and it's for any immigrant it's not just for the people who are coming to the U.S. anyone who is going from the US to a different part of the world or from any other country to the different country. So it's more like I was attending a wedding of one of my aunt's sons and the bride after all the ceremonies were done. I was just I think 13 years old and I saw her crying, she crying a lot, and I was really concerned where she's crying so much. So I asked my aunt 'What happened? Why she's crying?' So my aunt, a very wise old lady, she said one thing she said, 'When the plant is young it's easier to plant it somewhere else because it can grow roots. When the plant is older, if you plant it somewhere else it's difficult for it to have new roots and to reach out and to grow properly it will take some time.' So if are younger we come to a different country we adapt comparatively easy. I won't say it's easy but comparatively it's easy because you don't have too many memories. You don't have too many experiences and you can absorb a lot from the environment around you. And I came here when I was around 31 years of age. I had taught in India for almost 10 years. All my education my friends, my career, my family, and all my memories I would say were from that very place. So when I came here it was all new and I hadn't made many memories I had didn't have many friends, I was missing the culture, I was missing the food, and I was missing my family there and I was missing my friends and I was also into a new culture into a new family. Like I have mentioned I was recently married. When you're dating it's different (then) when you're married. When you're dating overseas a long distance relationship is different and when you are staying in a very different one and in a new family so you get to know each other and it takes some time. It

doesn't happen overnight. So that was the change that I was trying to balance in my personal life and in my cultural life. So that was kind of different but over the period of time it's been six years now and I'm happily married and I have a wonderful husband, two great wonderful loving kids, and a wonderful mother-in-law and the thing is that now I have more friends. I know the culture. I know the society around me and I have made more friends of my own. I know how things happen and what is to be expected from me and what I can expect from other people. I have more American friends now and people of color are also my friends. They help me understand, like you mentioned, different perspectives because I came from a different mindset. What I knew of America was through (cinematic) movies.

(Maritza laughs)

So when I came here on maybe reading articles or newspaper and I don't say that that's a very true picture because when I came here, I found people to be really very friendly very helpful and I was really happy. Everyone who would be passing by would say hi to you which was pretty new to me. In India you just pass by; if you don't know the person you don't say hi or hello to them. So it's like everybody says hi here and I was like 'Wow! That's great.' So that made me happy (Geet laughs) and I was like okay you open up to people and you get so many good happy faces to see everyday. And then if people like your child, they'll come and compliment you. So that was another thing and one thing that happened was really on the day of our wedding. It was a Saturday, and I was wearing a sequins dress and we had to go to Trader Joe's after the wedding and after that we were to go home. So my husband and I, we went to Trader Joe's at Excelsior and there was this lady at the counter and she said 'Your dress is pretty' and I said 'It's my wedding day today'. And she was she said 'Okay, wait for me for a second.' She went and she brought a big bouquet of flowers for me and she gave it to me and it was like it really touched my heart and I was so happy. So that was the kind of welcome I got and then I told myself that it's going to be good. So I wasn't afraid, but it was kind of a change. But after 5 years I would say I am happy. I understand the state (Minnesota), I understand the people around me a little better, and I am more comfortable here ,and as an immigrant I don't feel like an immigrant. I have two homes now: one in India and one here. So it's much better. And I think that it has contributed to my better mental health as well because initially it was a lot of pressure as well and now I'm happy. I understand the U.S. a little better and I feel more comfortable being here.

**Maritza:** Thank you so much! The anecdote from your aunt, definitely some powerful wisdom there. So you did move as you know, a little bit of an older plant, and then (Geet and Caroline laugh) you found a new home.

**Geet:** Yes.

**Maritza:** And now you have multiple homes which I think is pretty exciting. There is community all around you, both in this country and another one as well. And now that you're here and you are in a state of wellness and working on that wellness you have been able to extend your branches and you're continuing to do that with other people. That's pretty amazing.

**Geet:** Yup. Thank you.

**Maritza:** I wanted to thank you again so much for being here with us today Geet. I wanted to ask if you have any final comments that you would like to add.

**Geet:** Yes Maritza, definitely. I would say that talking about mental health reinforces, in my mind at least, that I have to take care of myself and it is important to take care of ourselves and we can take care of ourselves. It's not impossible. It might be difficult sometimes, but it is important and it can be done. And there are resources outside, there's society outside. You have family, you have friends. You have people outside who is really who are always there to help you. There are resources that you need to tap and NAMI is one of them, and I would like to take an opportunity to thank them for this chance to talk about mental health and how it is really important in our lives. Thank you so much.

**Maritza:** Well thank you for being with us today!

**Outro – Brian:** You've been listening to Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast produced by NAMI Minnesota. You can listen wherever you get your podcasts. Please subscribe and visit NAMI Minnesota online at [namimn.org](http://namimn.org).