

## Ajaypal's Story: Disappointments and Recovery

### ***Background:***

Ajaypal is a 52 year old Punjabi Sikh man who immigrated to Canada about 25years ago. He has been married for 25years and has two children, one attending university and the other is at school. Ajaypal has a strong sense that as the youngest child and still attending college when he immigrated to Canada, he *"did not have any exposure related to work"* in his home country and because of this he *"was not able to learn the harsh/hard realities of life."*

### ***Life Before Involvement with Mental Health Service:***

As a young adult, Ajaypal came to Canada expecting to find work and to make a reasonably easy transition to becoming settled in his new country. He was prepared to work hard and to take advantage of opportunities that came his way. However, once in the new country he realized how unprepared he felt about meeting the extreme challenges that would confront him in making the transition. Several factors contributed to Ajaypal's difficulties. Ajaypal feels that he was naïve and inexperienced to an extent before he left his home country. Due to his youth and being the youngest of the family he had as yet not had to look for work or to support himself or a family. He notes that he was aware of physical illnesses but was unaware about mental health problems, his life being free of stress partially because of his age. Ajaypal reminisces quite extensively about how easy going and outgoing he was, gaining pleasure by helping others while treating people with love and respect.

*"Before that, I was having a very easy going life, everything was jolly good and I was happy going person. I always remained happy and seek pleasure by helping others. I always respected and loved every one. I was jolly kind of person with nothing to worry about. I never realized that there is something named pain that exist in this world."*

Ajaypal's wife also notes that his life prior to his mental health struggles was good: *"It was really good, very good. I don't know how this can start suddenly."*

### ***Identification and Understanding of Mental Health Challenges:***

Ajaypal began to experience problems a couple of years after he moved to Canada. Since he had left behind his family and extended network in India,

when he began to feel lonely he reached out to people in his community for advice and comfort. He was quite open and trusting, sharing his problems with other members of the community in Canada. However, he has an intense sense of disappointment as he found that he was unable to obtain the support that he wanted. This lack of support from the community exacerbated his sense of disillusionment, isolation, and feelings of having problems that could not be resolved:

*"I used to trust everybody and always share my problems with others thinking that they are all sympathetic towards me and will be happy to help me, but that was not true and this impacted my life adversely."*

Ajaypal feels that if people did help him it was to gain something for them, but he did get some unconditional help from a couple of people. It struck Ajaypal that the nature of his community seemed to change in the new context, that is, the community was supportive in the home country but this did not carry over into the new environment: *"In my daily life, what ever exposure I had with my own community, that was not up to my expectations and due to those reasons I felt hurt."* After the initial reaching out to community members, Ajaypal became reluctant to share his problems because he came to the realization that instead of receiving the support that he wanted, he was being discussed negatively. He expresses grief about the lack of confidentiality and privacy in the community, stating that this developed in him a lack of trust which has influenced his reaching out to service providers.

Not finding support in the community and not having knowledge about services that may have been available to him, Ajaypal's loneliness increased resulting in him turning to alcohol to alleviate his problems. Indeed, Ajaypal highlights that this is how his problem drinking started but he soon realized that his excessive drinking resulted in other problems for him, for example, legal complications because of impaired driving charges. Additionally, he began to feel guilty about putting his wife through these difficulties:

*"I started feeling guilty at this stage because I realized that my wife is so good and she is fully cooperative with me in my recovery process. And what am I doing? I have not provided a good life to her. I remained in this circle i.e. feeling guilt and again start drinking and again feeling guilt and so on."*

On her part, Ajaypal's wife was also at a loss about his problems and how to help him. *"I don't know exactly why it happened (relapse). As a man he is a responsible person but we failed to understand what was happening in his mind and he relapsed time and again. We (including children) try to do our best to create good environment but we don't know what is missing."* Ajaypal speaks

poignantly about the increase in the levels of stress that he felt, the loss of trust in others, and being trapped in a vicious cycle of turning to alcohol for relief but then becoming guilt ridden when sober and drinking again to forget everything. *"All this led to my addictive behaviour and unstable state of mind."*

### ***Help-seeking Pathways***

Problems with the legal system, forced Ajaypal to obtain formal help from the social service system. His lawyer advised him that joining Alcoholics Anonymous would help him both with his legal problems as well as with his personal problems. Ajaypal also enrolled in a one month inpatient treatment program at the addictions branch of a hospital in Hamilton. During this time he fluctuated between feeling guilty about his behaviour and feeling sorry for himself wondering why he was experiencing these problems when he had not harmed anyone. Unfortunately, his stay at the hospital was not of much help as he did not share his feelings with the counselors there partially because he was not ready to share as yet. He subsequently received services from a couple of other mainstream agencies including a three month inpatient stay at a hospital. He then received services from Punjabi Community Health Center which he notes was the first time that he received treatment from a formal agency of his community.

It is here that Ajaypal is beginning to gain a sense of control over his problems. His social worker is impressed by his commitment but also highlights the struggles with alcohol consumption:

*"Alcohol has become a part and parcel of Ajaypal's life. He is one of the committed clients. As you know that you can't help any client as long as he is not fully cooperative with you. So he is one of the clients who follows directions given to him but the sad part is that he derails sometimes especially when alcohol takes over, and then he struggles a lot."*

Certainly, although the reasons are unclear, it took Ajaypal many years to engage in services as noted by his current service provider: *"By the time he came to seek treatment in our group, he had already had his license suspended for the third time. Now his driving license is suspended for life."* This worker realized that to be able to help Ajaypal, she needed to involve the whole family. The family struggled with long standing issues of disappointments in the effectiveness of services but the current interventions appear to be helpful. *"Here I would like to mention that to provide services to this client we worked with his entire family. My first meeting with his wife was the most difficult meeting as she was saying that he could not possibly stop drinking, and that she was so tired. We also started involving his children in the process of treatment."* As Ajaypal was still drinking heavily he was admitted to a chemical withdrawal

program. However, Ajaypal left the program right away leading his worker to reflect on the reason for this.

*"At that time we admitted him to get chemical withdrawal services. He came out of that withdrawal centre within an hour, we enquired from him why he came out of the centre and he told that "I don't want to get any support from inside and I do feel that no one likes me there." So he pointed out many gaps in those services."*

### ***Types of Involvement – Challenges with Mental Health Services***

Early on, Ajaypal struggled with mental health and addiction counseling services from mainstream agencies because of cultural diversity. However, he worked at making these resources work for him: *"Mainstream concepts, in certain aspect, are totally different than that of our community; their cultural and social values are totally different. Sometimes I found that different, but again I started realizing that this is part of their culture (mainstream) so I picked up what was relevant to me."* Ajaypal goes on to add that services from mainstream service providers could potentially not meet the needs of members from his community. Ajaypal himself initially was reticent about sharing information with mainstream service providers, but then found a way to pick aspects of the service that he could use adding that he has quite a good grasp of English and that over time he has become familiar with western cultural ways. He suggests that although these factors contributed to him taking away what he found useful from service providers, many from his community would have greater problems in making the services work for them. With regards to previous mental health services, his current social worker provides insights into his struggles with those services:

*"First of all, he felt as if he was being judged wherever he went. Sometimes language is a barrier for him and sometimes not because he can express himself in English. But he finds that whatever he can express freely in his own language, he can't express as well in English. Even though he knows English, he still finds it as a barrier to fully expressing his feelings."*

Another barrier that Ajaypal shared with his current service provider relates to the scheduling of appointments: *"Secondly, he also told that his timing of work overlaps with the timing of services (within the mainstream community). He is working from Monday – Friday and services are also available during that period. Our services suit him because they are available on Saturday."* She goes on to provide additional insights into his struggles with the mental health system.

*"He always used to say that when he starts craving a drink, he needs someone immediately who can hold his hand (away from the bottle). He*

*also used to say that withdrawal services should be culturally appropriate. He also mentioned one example about their (withdrawal center's) meal. He said that their meal is not according to the meal he is used to having (according to his culture)."*

And finally as with many services, an ongoing issue is the frequency of services and the need for mentorship for clients:

*"I feel that frequency of available services should be more and it should suit the needs and time (availability) of client. For example, we have services once in a week only because of our own limitations but if these services were available on different dates that would make it more accessible to the clients. If more funds were available and more locations were available then these services could become more accessible to the clients. Also, if we could train mentors who could follow up with these persons."*

### ***Types of Involvement – Satisfying Experiences***

Ajaypal feels that service providers from a similar cultural background would be able to provide more relevant services stating:

*"Our community service providers have knowledge of our social aspect and that is a big benefit in the treatment. Personally, I feel that I could have faced a lot of problems for getting treatment from various agencies if I was not that aware or educated and I find that most of our community people suffer because of these things. Otherwise treatment is okay; only, cultural and social understanding plays a role in getting and providing effective treatment."*

Ajaypal does caution that obtaining services from someone of the same background requires one to overcome the initial lack of trust of community members that develops when informal services from the community have not worked in past attempts at getting help. Thus it is important to know that formal service providers from the same community respect ones privacy and will maintain confidentiality. His current social worker shares her experience regarding Ajaypal's struggles to trust service providers and to feel that he is not being judged for his problems: *"First of all, it took him a long time to trust our services. Now he calls us anytime. Now even his family has started contacting us about his relapse. So we had to work hard to show him that our purpose is to help him get rid of his addiction."* Although Ajaypal had been to many places prior to coming to the current agency, he was not able to get the help that he needed, but at the current agency the fit seems to meet his needs as captured by his social workers comments: *"According to the client he went to many other*

*places (to get services for his problem). He struggled for many years. He said, "But the day I came here in [name of men's group] I didn't feel like going anywhere else because the others (agencies/organizations) are not able to meet my needs. Here I feel at home.""*

Helping someone to conquer/control alcohol addiction is extremely challenging and taxing for service providers, but here the social worker provides insight into what Ajaypal values about their services:

*"He told us that here at least someone is listening to him. He repeatedly relapses. During the last three years he has relapsed at least five to six times. When he is not drinking alcohol he is really a wonderful person. We are able to judge from his behavior that he will relapse shortly or has already relapsed. At one point he told us that as long as he is attending [men's group] that means he is doing fine. As long as he remains in touch with this group services, his willpower remains strong."*

### ***Changes Associated with Involvement in Mental Health Services***

Ajaypal makes the point that, initially, in trying to get help, he turned to persons from his own cultural background for informal support, but this approach harmed him as he felt labeled by people. The sense of negative labeling further aggravated his problems as it contributed to negative thinking about himself and a greater sense of isolation and alienation from the community. Change occurred for him when he participated in counseling from formal services, initially from mainstream service providers and later from ethno-specific agencies, and also because of the support from his immediate family, particularly his wife. However, as noted earlier, he only learned about formal services when his excessive drinking escalated to the point of resulting in legal consequences for him. His wife points to the combination of factors that contributed to his participating and remaining in counseling:

*"He was inclined to get treatment in addition to our efforts. He did change a little bit and again relapsed but he remained consistent in improving even after the relapse. Our grown-up children also became one of the factors for his change. Legal complications (like drinking and driving) also played a role in pushing him to seek help and gradually he learned how to get help and he tried to remain connected (with service providers). I always supported him, even the children supported him. We never let him feel as if he is alone."*

Ajaypal currently continues to receive services from Punjabi Community Mental Health Service. Having gone through a difficult path of finding services he is

now more in control of his addiction although concerns for relapses continue. Through formal intervention, Ajaypal learned to overcome the stigma that goes with seeking help. He notes:

*"Earlier, I used to think what others will say, but after getting treatment and support from counselors and my wife, I started gaining self respect and self confidence, which made me strong, and I stopped thinking about others, and this was my turning point."*

Ajaypal further notes that he is now a more positive thinker and sees himself as a changed person.

Another factor that has helped Ajaypal's recovery is the involvement of the family in services:

*"We imparted education and skills to his wife so that she knows at what point she needs to act differently so that he gets the proper message i.e., what the family wants. .... That has worked very well. Even his son attended our camp (organized for youth)."*

Ajaypal has also become well connected with the men from his group which provides him with a strong supportive network:

*"...he got a strong network (by coming to this group). People used to offer him help too from within the group. For example he is not driving and other persons from the group start offering him ride whenever he needs. So he is able to co-ordinate with other clients for rides."*

### ***Reflections and Learnings***

In thinking about what could happen differently in terms of service provision, Ajaypal comments that for individuals who are experiencing mental health problems, it is important that they are able to keep their jobs. He has had the experience of many people from his community who lose their jobs when they are experiencing problems and this adds to their problems as they then also have financial struggles. He notes the importance of organizations helping individuals to find and keep work while they are receiving treatment for mental health and addiction problems. Another recommendation made by Ajaypal is the need for courses for newcomers/immigrants about challenges they are likely to face during the initial stages of their move, how to cope with these challenges, where to obtain relevant services, and general information on society and systems in Canada.

With regards to service provision, Ajaypal's social worker suggests that addiction services should go beyond just addressing the addiction but should also include counseling for other problems, services should be of longer duration, and cultural diversity should be taken into consideration:

*"What I find from my experience is that available services are focused on the problem of addiction only. It should be person-focused i.e. what are the root causes of the problems and we should attend to those factors too.*

*Mostly every organization has its own specific time-bound program. For example, some offer treatment for 10 weeks, some for 15 or 16 weeks and so on. These services should be made available as a part of an ongoing process. In this case for example, it took us over three years to find out the root cause of this particular client. Organizations just don't realize that client's may need more time.... I think a major part of the funding is being allocated to the mainstream agencies, and ethno- specific agencies are not getting the required funding.*

*I would reiterate that the approach to dealing with persons suffering from addiction and mental health problems should be appropriate to their specific culture. Sometimes policies and procedures of an organization become barriers in providing services. They should not be rigid but should be flexible enough to help clients."*

Ajaypal's concluding thoughts are about the importance of building trust. Early on, newcomers should be told that formal services, whether from the same community or from the mainstream community will ensure privacy and confidentiality. This knowledge can help newcomers to approach these agencies without fear and would help them to settle more quickly into Canadian society. This final comment from Ajaypal captures the complexity of providing relevant services for newcomers but also provides insights into how it can be done:

*"It is important to mention here that once you lose confidence and trust in your relative and friend, then and thereafter you start losing trust in service providers of your own culture/community/ organization, thinking that they are also the same as others in your culture. At that stage, we want to seek help from other community organizations, but then we have other barriers like language, expression, etc. So it is very difficult, but trust building can play a vital role in getting proper services. So we should devise a kind of system where we can keep balance of both."*