



Dr Devika Bhushan, MD, Senior Health Equity Advisor, CBHA

1. What does the word “community” mean to you? How would you describe your community?

We moved around a lot when I was young — by age 10, I was attending my 7th school in my 3rd country: in Manila, the Philippines, after the US, and India. And so not only ‘community,’ but also the concept of ‘home’ evolved for me.

Over my childhood, I came to think of ‘home’ as wherever we, my nuclear family, were living, with cultural influences retained from previous homes. And I began thinking of ‘community’ as those bonds, light at first, but surer and deeper with time, that sprung up wherever ‘home’ shifted to. And ‘community’ was an always expanding concept, including those we had left behind and could choose to return to.

Today, my husband, toddler, and I are lucky to be in a phase of our lives where we are working remotely and therefore, able to shift our physical home from time to time. Starting with Mexico City in June 2023, we are living nomadically for a few months. So ‘home’ is, once again, wherever we are.

And our ‘community’ is dispersed — no matter where we find ourselves, we are in touch with family and friends from India to the US from here, and have even hosted several folks in our new home, replete with a new set of joint adventures that help long-standing bonds to flourish, and for our sense of community to deepen even though we no longer share a physical home.

2. What is your primary responsibility at your job?

By way of background, I’m a pediatrician, gender and health equity researcher, and policymaker.

I now wear two main hats: as a strategic health advisor and a mental health activist.

I provide strategic advisory support to a portfolio of entities that advance resilience or equity—or both—like in the case of CBHA. This portfolio also includes GreyMatter, a venture capital fund dedicated to mental health innovation; the Weitzman Institute, focused on primary care innovation; Health Management Associates, devoted to health policy and strategy; and *BrainStorm*, a documentary aiming to inspire and educate around bipolar disorder. I also serve on the Board of Directors for the California Partners Projects (focused on gender equity and child well-being) and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI National, focused on national mental health advocacy).

As a mental health activist and someone with lived experience with bipolar disorder, I have a personal mission of helping to destigmatize mental illness through storytelling and spread evidence-based tools for healing and health. To this end, I've launched an evidence-based well-being [newsletter](#) and mental illness [YouTube channel/podcast](#) called *Spread the light with Dr Devika B.*

3. What's an interesting fact about you most people don't know?

I love interpretive dancing.

4. Do you feel you have faced challenges as a BIPOC leader that others might not have?

As an immigrant from India and the Philippines to the US, I have often felt like cultural scripts or experiences core to being an American were inaccessible or foreign to me. Even today, after decades of experience in this country, in certain spaces, I do sometimes feel like an outsider.

As a woman of color with a multicultural upbringing, I feel that I have had to work harder than some people to understand and own my narrative, my expertise, and my voice.

With deep cultural influences that sometimes gave me conflicting messages around leadership — such as around being self-effacing versus self-promoting or being other-oriented versus listening to my own instincts in crafting decisions — it took me longer to find my own equilibrium and style as a leader.

That said, though it was harder to come by, thanks to my upbringing, I think my leadership style today is authentic, adaptive, and open to diverse thought partnership, and allows my colleagues to truly be themselves and be celebrated for their unique traits.

5. What motivates you in your field?

There is still so far for us to go in ensuring equitable and sustainable access to well-being for all — and I'm committed to wielding clinical, research, policy, and cultural levers to help us get there. I'm motivated by a vision of a world whereby mental illness carries no stigma and we all have enduring access to the tools we need to stay well and thrive.

6. What advice do you have to BIPOC individuals as they work towards becoming leaders in their own communities? Any lessons learned?

Believe deeply in yourself. So often, the person who can *most* get in your own way is you — so make sure to do the work to get out of your own way, and you will soar.

Embrace imperfection and self-compassion. Seek excellence from yourself and your colleagues, rather than perfection. Nobody and nothing can be perfect. Learn from your mistakes and then move on from them — and remember that you're doing the very best you can with the resources available to you at any given time.

Your self-worth should not be contingent on what you do or how far you go in a project or in your career. Your self-worth is a given, and should be constant no matter what's happening around you.

You have a unique flame inside you that's yours alone — do what you can to find and nourish that flame. Surround yourself with the kinds of people and practices that help fan it instead of subdue it — and you will go far.