

DATE: 1/8/2025

THE SALIK FOUNDATION UK

ADDICTION FOCUS GROUP

AUTHOR

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AFFILIATIONS

High Level Northern Trust | The Young Khadims



INTRODUCTION

We gathered insights from 8 young Pakistani men, aged 14 to 40, all from the Rochdale area. The aim was to explore addiction issues affecting South Asian Muslim communities in Rochdale, and understand attitudes, stigma, and support needs. We were supported by High Level Northern Trust and The Young Khadims

OBJECTIVE

To explore the topic of addiction, the stigma attached to it and hear about the experiences, if any, these young men had of either with addiction or supporting someone with addiction.

METHODOLOGY

We held an in-person focus group at Bilal Islamic Centre with 8 Pakistani Muslim men aged 14-40 from Rochdale. The session explored addiction through interactive activities, including a word association game, a multiple-choice quiz, and a 'statement corner' exercise to spark discussion. We introduced real-life examples and Islamic teachings to explore cultural and religious responses to addiction. Participants also gave feedback on short social media videos and completed a post-survey to reflect on what they had learned.

RESULTS

- Perceptions shifted from seeing addiction as weakness to recognising it as a health issue.
- Stigma, shame, and poor vocabulary block open discussion.
- Few crisis pathways; nitrous oxide use rising with low awareness.
- Mosques urged to address addiction, train imams, and challenge myths.
- Real stories on social media seen as most effective for awareness and education

ANALYSIS

At the beginning of the session, many described addiction as a personal weakness or moral failure. However, by the end of the discussion, most came to recognise it as a health condition, often linked to underlying trauma, anxiety, or depression.

Cultural Stigma and Language Barriers

Stigma was consistently identified as a major barrier to acknowledging and addressing addiction. Participants discussed how the concepts of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame) shape community responses, with families often hiding addiction to avoid public embarrassment. In some cases, this leads to complete rejection of the individual.

Language emerged as another significant issue. Terms such as *nasha* (intoxication) failed to capture the complex concept of addiction. Similarly, words like *chursy* (a derogatory slang term for "drug user") were noted for their dehumanising impact. These words fail to reflect addiction as a complicated health issue. Many participants also admitted they were unfamiliar with the Urdu word for trauma (*sadma*), highlighting how limited the everyday vocabulary around addiction and mental health is within the community. This was not because the language did not exist but rather the conversations were not being had.

Silence from Religious Institutions

Participants voiced frustration at the lack of open discussion about addiction within mosques. Despite the growing problem of drug use and drug dealing among young South Asian men, they felt these issues are rarely addressed from the minbar. They urged mosque leadership and imams to break the silence and engage directly with these concerns.

There was a clear consensus that religious institutions could play a vital role in prevention and early intervention, but only if they are willing to address addiction as a serious health issue rather than ignoring or moralising it. More training and awareness was needed in this regard.

Crisis Support Gaps

One participant shared a powerful account of supporting a young man experiencing suicidal thoughts in the middle of the night. As someone known and trusted locally, he was contacted in distress. Despite his efforts to encourage the young man to seek professional help, the individual refused any form of signposting. Eventually, the participant found him standing at a busy junction during a breakdown and was able to intervene and ensure his safety.

This incident sparked a wider conversation about the lack of clear crisis pathways. Participants told us that many in the community simply don't talk about mental health and don't know where to turn to during moments of crisis. There was a certain sense of insecurity born out of stigma and ignorance that prevented them accessing mainstream mental health and recovery services.

Nitrous Oxide Use and Lack of Awareness

Another key topic that emerged was the widespread use of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) among South Asian youth. Participants described how widespread its use was becoming and how easy it was to obtain. They felt little understanding existed among elders and youngsters about its dangers.

To explore this generational disconnect further, we spoke with some elders we knew personally outside the focus group. When shown discarded nitrous oxide canisters, many said they had seen them littered in the streets but didn't know what they were. Once informed, they expressed shock that such harmful substances were being used so casually by young people in their own communities.

Outside the focus group, in conversation with youngsters we know, they have told us how nitrous oxide abuse is becoming the drug of choice for young people and casually being used by young South Asian men and women alongside cannabis where both are consumed at the same time. Some have spoken to us about how their friends have become addicted to it even though it isn't seen as physically addictive like other drugs such as cannabis. In our post-focus group feedback form, a participant mentioned more awareness about the prevalence and dangers of nitrous oxide was needed for the elder and young generation.

Role of Mosques and Community Leaders

Participants strongly agreed that addiction should be spoken about openly in mosques, especially during high-attendance times such as Friday (Jumma) prayers. They called for training for imams on addiction and mental health, so they can respond compassionately and signpost effectively.

There was a particular emphasis on empowering younger, upcoming imams to lead the way. Participants believed this could positively influence older religious leaders and shift attitudes within the wider community.

Tackling Misinformation and Supernatural Beliefs

While there was recognition that mental health plays a significant role in addiction, many noted that psychological distress is often misunderstood or attributed to supernatural causes such as *jadoo* (black magic) or *jinn* possession. As a result, people are more likely to seek help from religious figures than qualified professionals. In their experience, people were either too quick to jump to supernatural conclusions before exhausting all other more common reasons for mental and psychological distress. They felt that young people turned to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism which only exacerbated their mental health more.

Participants valued the inclusion of Islam in the session. We did not discuss Islamic approaches to addiction but rather explored a case study of someone going to an imam for their alcohol addiction. They noted how Imams might give adverse advice - while although Islamically sound - could lead to more harm than good for someone suffering from addiction (for example, sudden alcohol withdrawal causing shock to the body) due to lack of knowledge on this particular subject. Participants acknowledged the limits of faith-based approaches – particularly when individuals fear being judged or spiritually condemned. However, many also believed that faith could be a tool to help people battle addiction and a facilitator shared his own positive experience of how faith helped him to manage his addiction.

Online Campaigning and Outreach Work

As part of our outreach work we wanted to get feedback on social media posts we had created and asked the focus group to rate them by effectiveness. The most effective ones containing real human beings showing real struggles and experiences with addiction followed by animations in different South Asian languages. There was broad consensus that social media was a powerful tool to reach different groups which is presently underused..

CONCLUSION

Our findings highlight the urgent need for more open and informed conversations about addiction and its underlying causes within South Asian Muslim communities. Participants identified a harmful combination of stigma, limited education, silence around the issue, and a lack of collective action as major barriers to change. They expressed a clear desire for the community – including families, leaders, and institutions – to engage more honestly, compassionately, and proactively in addressing addiction and mental health. We feel the first step is to raise awareness, get the conversations going and capture the extent, scope and nature of the problem of addiction within our communities so we can respond effectively. This requires more online and offline outreach work within South Asian communities and stimulate (even provoke) discussions within homes, institutions and the broader South Asian community.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIONS

- **Raise Awareness Campaigns** – Use real-life stories and targeted multilingual social media content to normalise conversations about addiction and mental health in South Asian communities.
- **Mosque Engagement** – Encourage mosques to address addiction during Friday sermons, host dedicated sessions, and provide culturally aware training for imams (especially younger leaders).
- **Language & Education Resources** – Develop clear, non-stigmatising terms in Urdu/Pahari for addiction and mental health, and distribute educational materials to families and community leaders.
- **Combat Myths & Misinformation** – Create resources to address supernatural explanations for addiction and promote professional, evidence-based help alongside faith support.
- **Nitrous Oxide Awareness** – Run intergenerational education sessions on its dangers, targeting both young people and elders.
- **Crisis Pathway Development** – Establish clear, trusted routes for individuals in crisis, including community “first responders” trained to de-escalate and signpost.
- **Community Leader Training** – Equip religious and cultural leaders with basic knowledge of addiction, withdrawal risks, and local support services.
- **Proactive Outreach** – Facilitate discussions in community centres, youth spaces, and other gathering points to spark awareness and encourage more open, honest dialogue.
- **Collaboration with Services** – Partner with mainstream addiction and mental health services to improve cultural competence and build trust in South Asian communities.
- **Data Collection** – Continue capturing the scale, scope, and nature of addiction in the community to inform targeted interventions.

HELP US BREAK THE STIGMA AROUND ADDICTION, EDUCATE SERVICE PROVIDERS REGARDING CULTURAL BARRIERS AND SUPPORT THOSE SUFFERING FROM ADDICTION AS WELL AS THE FAMILIES HELPING THEM.

Reflections from Facilitators

At The Salik Foundation UK, we are committed to improving the quality of engagement and support we offer, particularly for those affected by addiction within our communities.

In planning our recent focus group, we anticipated a young audience and took steps to ensure the session was interactive and inclusive. To maintain engagement, we used games, storytelling, and visual props, including realistic replicas of street drugs, to encourage open discussion and hands-on learning. Sharing our own lived experiences and those of people we have supported helped create a space that was relatable, compassionate, and authentic.

While we tried our best to create a welcoming environment, for example, by providing food and drink, we also recognise that there is room for growth in how we conduct our sessions and support participants.

Areas for Improvement and Future Planning

While the focus group was well-received, we identified several ways to improve future sessions:

- Printed materials or take-home resources would have given participants something to reflect on after the session.
- More visual content, such as short films or animations, could deepen understanding and appeal to different learning styles.
- Breakout groups or pairs might have made it easier for quieter participants to contribute, as the larger circle format may have been intimidating for some.
- Incentives or thank-you tokens for young attendees would be a thoughtful way to recognise the time and effort they gave.
- We also believe the session duration (90 minutes) needed to be longer as there was still so much things people wanted to say before moving to the next activity.

We also recognise that this session engaged only male participants from second and third generation Pakistani backgrounds. In future, we are committed to hosting:

- Focus groups specifically for women, in safe and supportive settings.
- Mixed-gender youth sessions, to reflect the broader experience of young people today.
- Sessions tailored for the elder generation, delivered in the languages they are most comfortable with.
- Focused discussions for people supporting loved ones with addiction, who often feel unheard and isolated in their journeys.
- Focused groups exploring addiction with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds

Our Current Position

At present, we are operating with no funding—under £1,000—donated entirely by the community. A large portion of this has already been gifted to grassroots organisations working directly with people in recovery, as both a gesture of goodwill and an investment in future collaboration. We are not here to duplicate and would prefer to contribute to what established organisations are currently doing.

Our Commitment

As a charitable organisation, we believe we are in service to the people. We will continue to listen, reflect, and learn—embracing feedback, owning our shortcomings, and always striving to serve our communities better.

We are just at the beginning, but our direction is clear: compassion, collaboration, and community-first. We are committed to sharing our research and findings with you all for the betterment of our communities.

Mustafa Hameed (Project Coordinator)

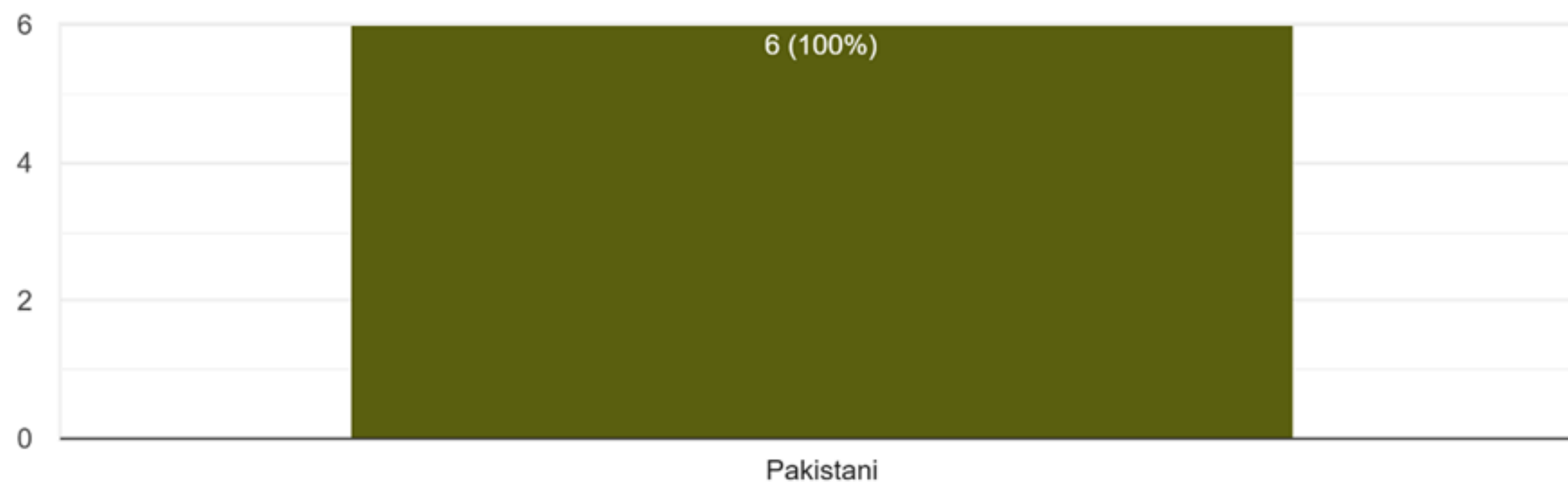
Jamal Aziz (The Young Khadims and Salik Foundation Trustee)

Waffa Hameed (High Level Norther Trust and Salik Foundation)

FEEDBACK SURVEY RESULTS

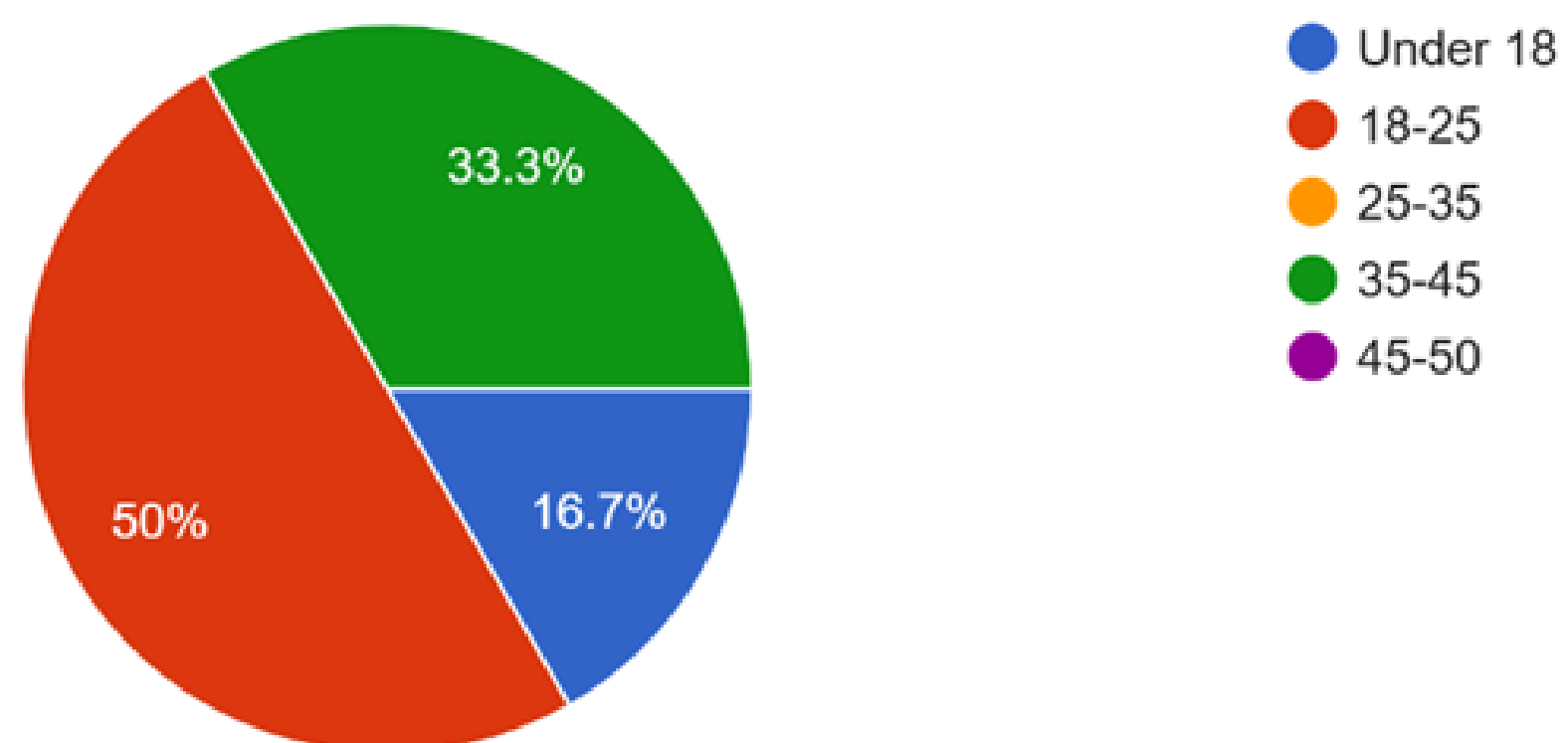
What is your ethnic background?

6 responses



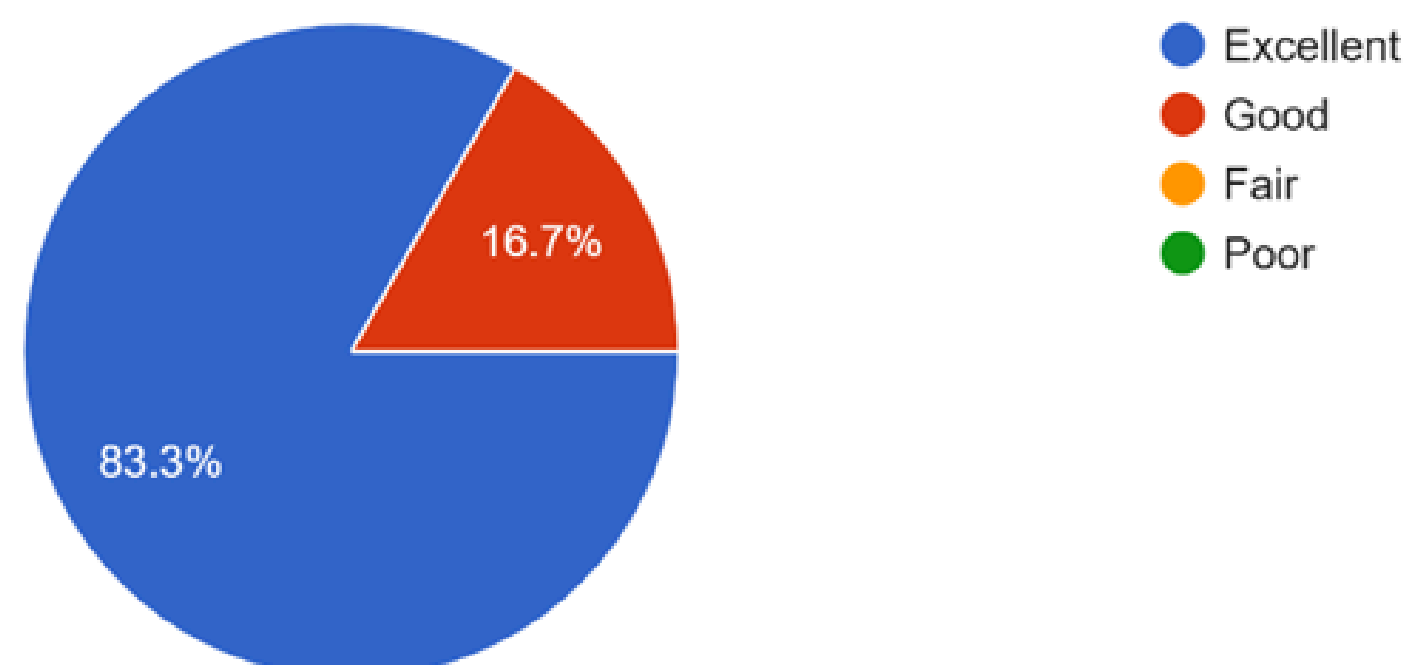
What is your age?

6 responses



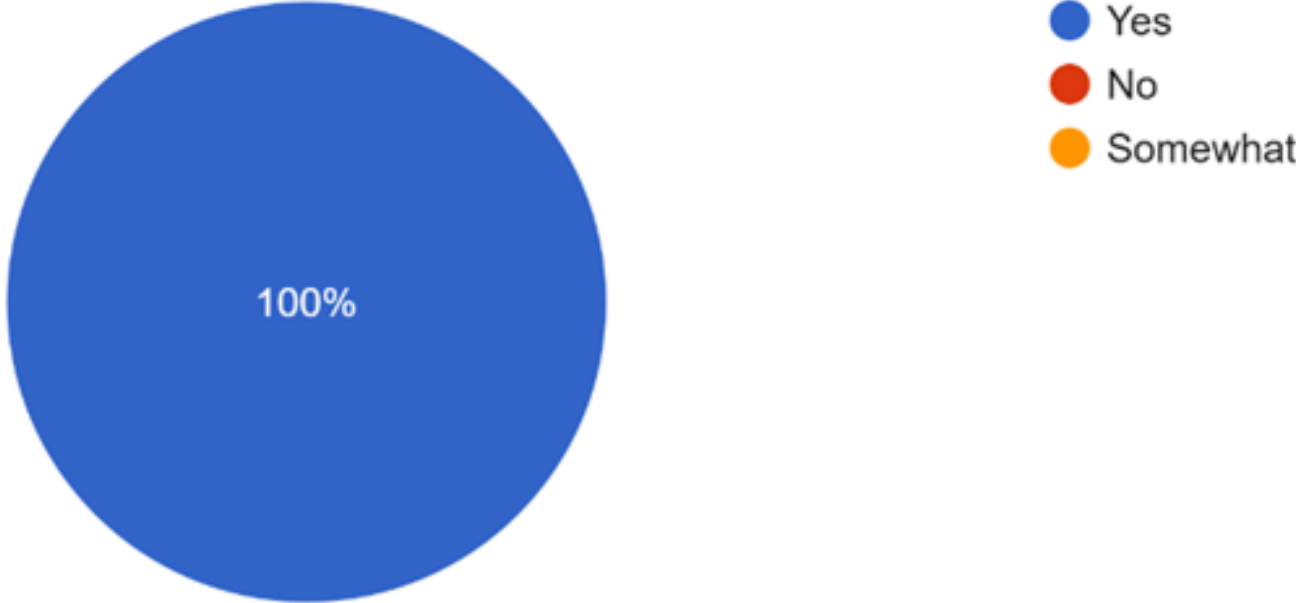
Q1. How would you rate the overall focus group session?

6 responses



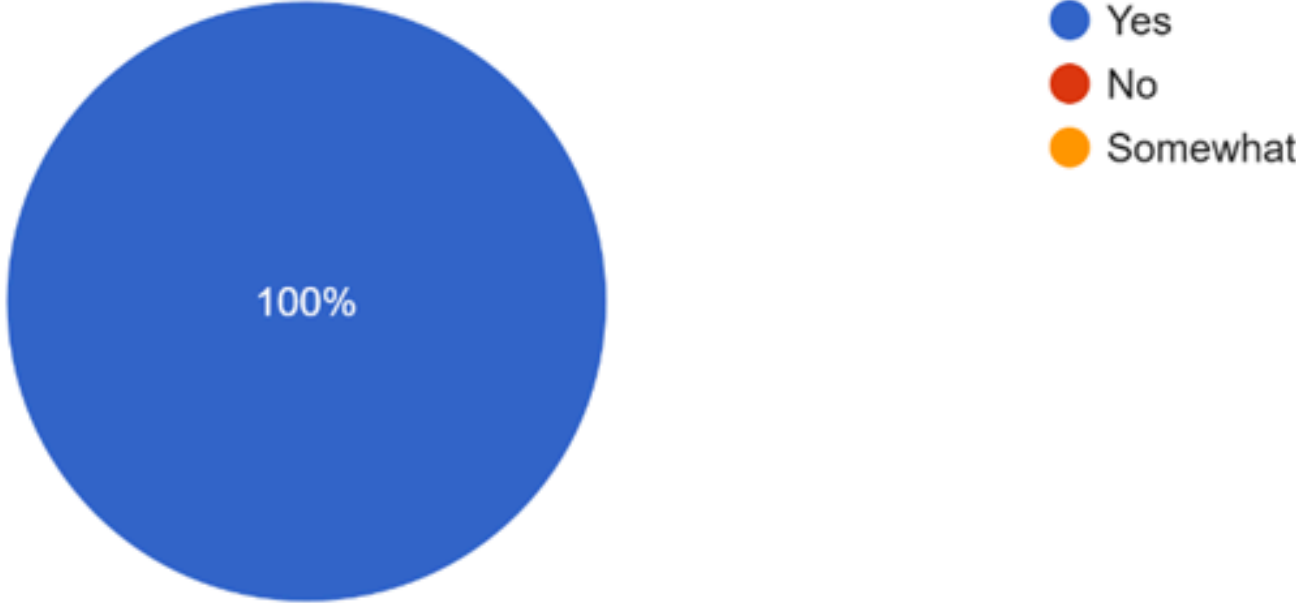
Q2. Did you feel comfortable sharing your thoughts during the session?

6 responses



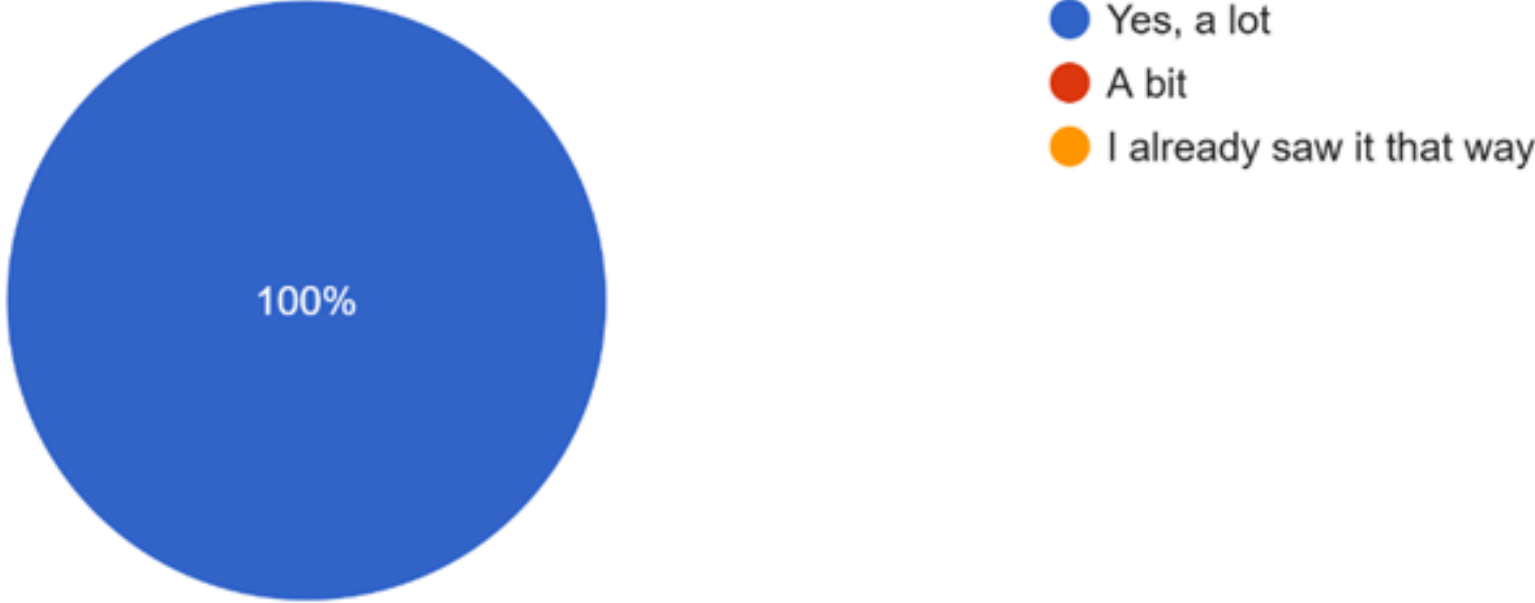
Q3. Was the session respectful and inclusive of different views?

6 responses



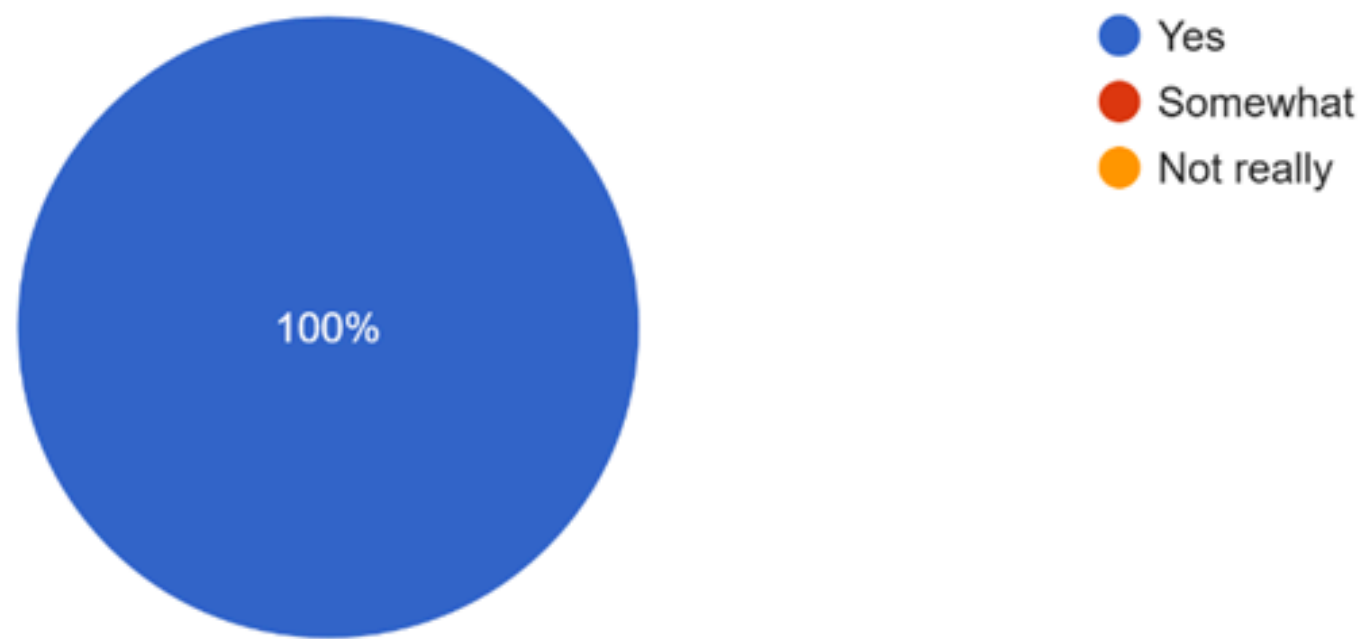
Q5. Has your understanding of addiction as a health issue (rather than a moral failing) changed?

6 responses



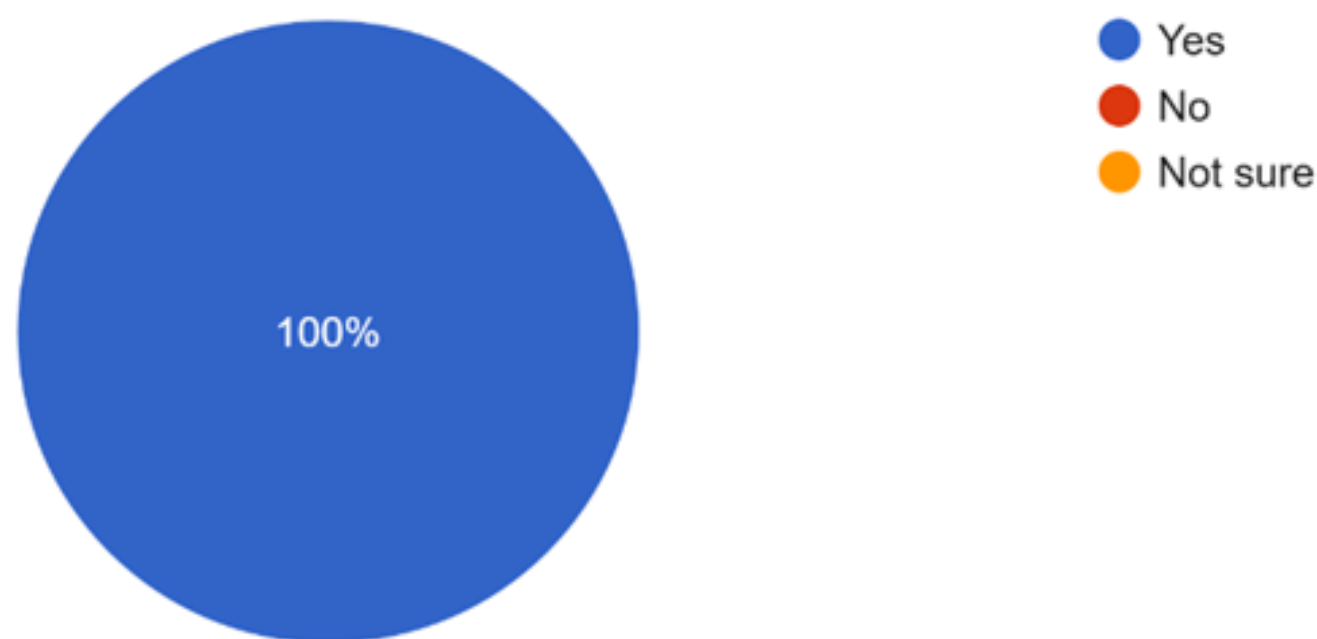
Q.6 Did the Islamic perspective shared today help shape your thinking about addiction and recovery?

5 responses



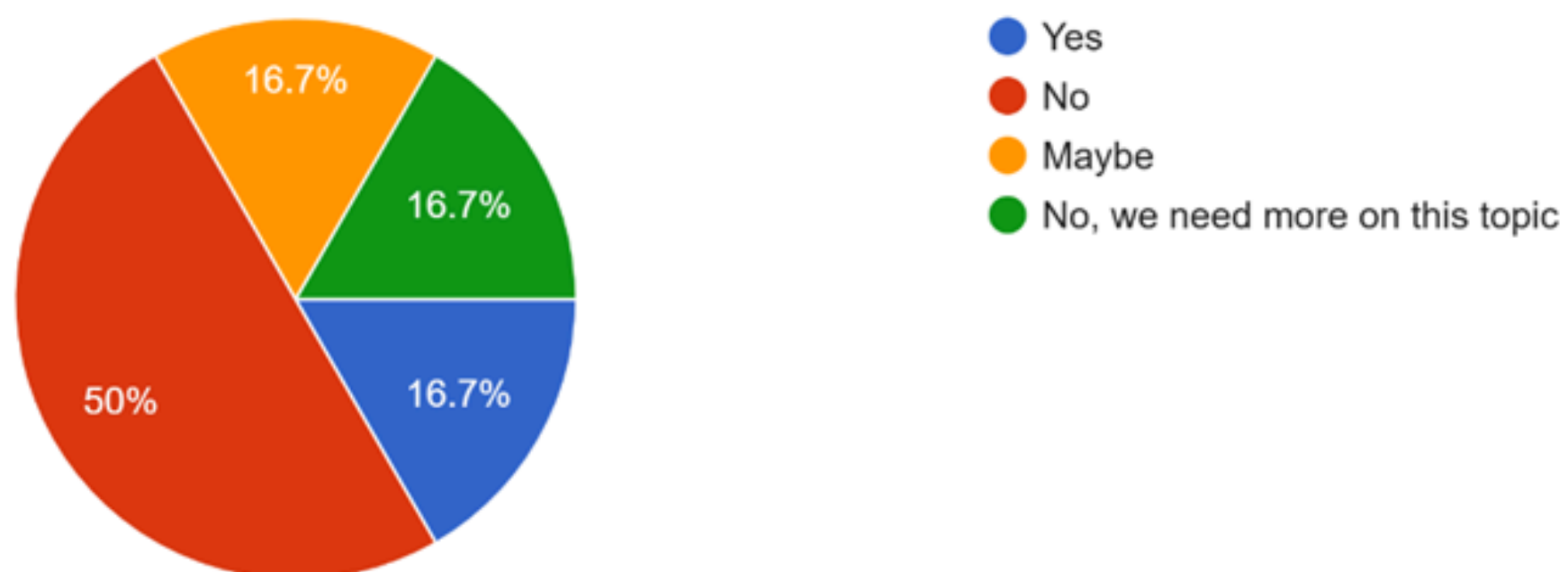
Q7. Do you think more people in your community need education on this topic?

6 responses



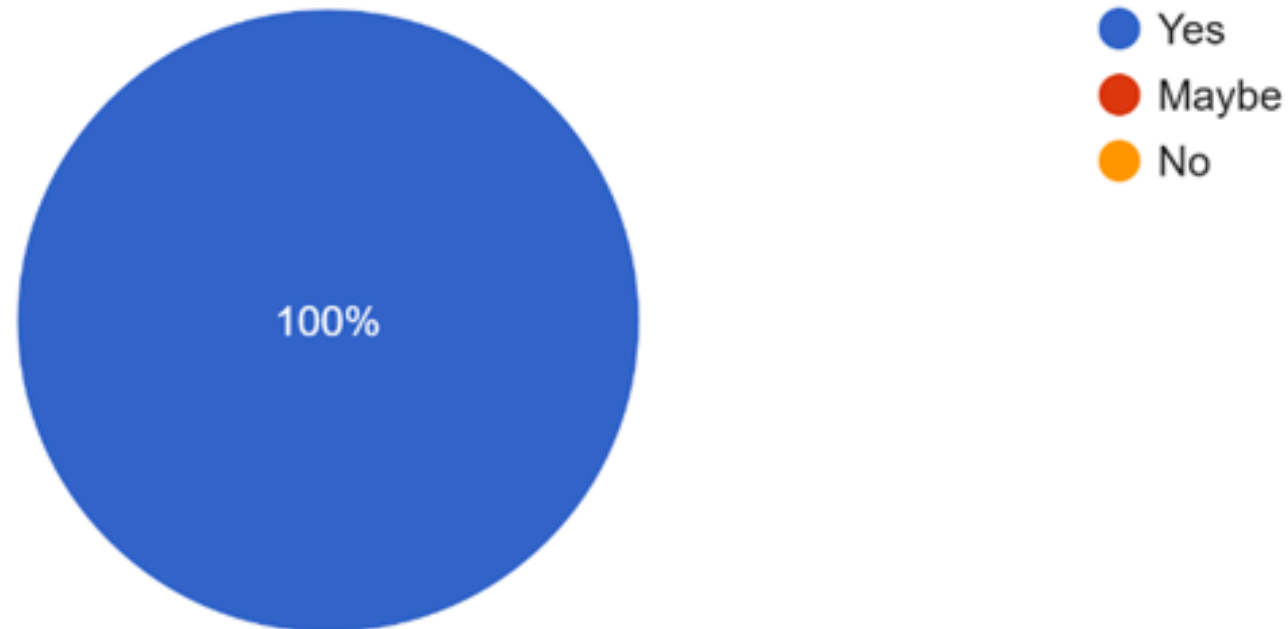
Q8. Do you think our Muslim leaders speak enough about this topic?

6 responses



Q9. Would you like to be involved in future sessions, workshops, or campaigns on this topic?

6 responses



Q10. What other topics would you like us to explore in the future?

4 responses

More group sessions and interactive like today

Maybe some more addiction stories, real life case studies/examples

Mostly addiction based topics, the most used drugs in our community

Laughing gas

Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share?

6 responses

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big problem in our community we need more talking

Brilliant session from the brothers who delivers them, may allah bless their good work they are doing.

Nope

Overall very well explained, covering the causes of addiction and what are the barriers people in addiction face which means they don't speak about it

No

PICTURES FROM THE FOCUS GROUP











Quotes from Participants

*It was brilliant to
talk about
addiction...*

*Brilliant session
from the brothers*

*It's something
that's seen as a
guilt.*

*We need to overcome
the shame and speak
openly*

**The Salik
Foundation
UK**



Breaking the Stigma Around Addiction

**For Enquiries, Feedback and
Collaborations:**

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Special Thanks To

HIGH LEVEL NORTHERN TRUST

THE YOUNG KHADIMS

BILAL ISLAMIC CENTRE