

Is dropping a semester worth it?

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Let’s say you’re in need of a break because you’re having to deal with a lot more than what you can cope with. However, this break will need to last longer than a day or two. The break you need needs to run the length of an entire semester of your university. The question now is whether or not taking a semester gap is worth it.

We reached out to two undergrad students – Zarin Rayhana (Information Technology, Griffith University, Australia), and Sakib Shadman (School of Business, Independent University, Bangladesh), who have previously dropped a semester each in order to cope with certain things, and asked them to share their thoughts and experience regarding the matter.

WHAT COULD BE THE REASON FOR DROPPING AN ENTIRE SEMESTER?

As mentioned earlier, stress is one of the main reasons you should go on a break. However, it’s not necessarily the only reason to make that decision. Zarin took a break due to her lack of motivation from studies which resulted from stress, while Sakib decided to do the same strictly for professional reasons.

“I had recently started a business and I needed some time to bring it into shape,” said Sakib. “Another reason I took the break was to get an appointment letter from the place I worked at by giving them 3 months’ worth of full-time hours.”

Many students have the misfortune of not being able to start the semester due to financial reasons. Hence, they’re forced into dropping the semester. This scenario is more common in private universities in comparison to the public ones. Some of these students go on to do different types of jobs so that they can save up money for their next semester.

There are also cases where students find themselves starting the semester a bit too late, and fail to catch up. For instance, if they have to travel away from home or go abroad for a long period of time, such that they end up missing two-three weeks of classes, they’ll have to face a lot of difficulties when they try to catch up. Under such circumstances, many of these students would prefer dropping that particular semester instead of risking a bad GPA.

Besides, students have to deal with various other issues, which can take up a lot of their time as well as affect their mental or physical well-being. These cases may include personal problems like the passing away of a loved one, as well as different health problems. Under such circumstances, it is natural to assume that they will not be in a state to bear the burdens of the semester ahead.

Everyone will have their own reasons for dropping the semester. It’s a huge decision to make that comes with its own benefits as well as repercussions. Hence, do a thorough risk assessment before you go ahead with the drop.

Explain the situation to your parents or guardians, and ask them for their input into the matter as well. Given how they might tend to be sceptical of the idea or oblivious to your problems, you should make sure that you are presenting your case backed with proper justification, as well as the expected consequences of carrying on with the semester anyways. Consult with your on-campus counsellor if you need to for this purpose.

WHAT CAN I DO DURING THE BREAK?
Given that your break will last the entire semester, it can be assumed that you’ll be spending a total of 4-6 months away from day to day academic activities. Hence, you can spend the time doing what you like. If you want to be productive, you can try working on your existing skills or go ahead and learn something completely new. If necessary, enrol yourself in different online and offline courses. You could even get a part-time job.

“Dropping a semester helped me find new hobbies that I otherwise wouldn’t have time for, like painting and photography,” says Zarin. “At the same time, it allowed me to revisit my old ones, such as reading and writing. I even got a part-time job that not only helped me save up

for my wish list and a small vacation, but also reinforced my resume.”

In case you just want to give time to yourself, you should spend time doing the things you think will help you relieve your stress. Give yourself the time to re-think some of your decisions as well as plan new ones, something Sakib did that eventually helped him with his professional life. “I got some alone time to relax and figure out what I wanted, which direction I wanted to go towards, and plan my next moves accordingly,” says Sakib. “It helped me with work, sort out my personal affairs, and even get a promotion. I also got composure, and am not in contempt with life.”

WHAT ARE THE DRAWBACKS OF DROPPING A SEMESTER?

The primary drawback of dropping a semester is the constant feeling that you’re going to fall behind in your academics. But even this is an abstract thought that’ll in no way affect you if you don’t let it. “The only drawback I found is the small nagging at the back of your head that you’re falling behind,” says Zarin. “However, the fact that you get to learn things outside of academics and get new perspectives on life overshadows the anxiety of falling behind.”

There is also the concern that dropping a semester will cause a delay in graduation. Many students are afraid about the fact that if they can’t complete all the credits required for their graduation in due time, it will hamper their flow or future plans of enrolling in a post-graduation program, getting into a job, or leaving for abroad—which is true. As you take a semester gap, you’re forced to push back your graduation. To add to that, there is also the societal pressure to get done with

your university so that you can move on to do the other important things in life.

Besides that, you may be stripped of your scholarship or any other academic privilege you’re enjoying if you take such a semester gap, depending on your university policies. If such policies are in place at your institution, it’s recommended that you try and avoid such a gap, or present your problems to the respective authorities and ask them to make an exception for your case.

WHAT IS THE END RESULT?

At the end of the day, dropping an entire semester to recollect your composure or work on your professional skills is not a bad idea. In fact, it’s a trade-off that can only work in your favour, IF you can make the most of it.

“After taking a semester off, I went back to university with way more vigour to do better in studies because of my renewed happy energy and changed perspectives,” added Zarin. “The key is to utilise the time properly, either by learning or just focusing on yourself. Otherwise, you might regret dropping the semester in the first place.”

Taking a semester gap may not be the only way to deal with whatever circumstances you’re having to go through. However, at times, it may be the most reasonable way to deal with them. If you are in a situation where dropping the semester is the only viable option and you have the privilege to do so without having to face any adverse consequences, you should consider taking the gap.

Faisal wants to be the very best, like no one ever was. To survive university is his real test, to graduate is his cause. Send him memes and motivation at abir.afc@gmail.com



PHOTO: RAFAT ISLAM

WHAT DO STUDENTS EAT?

RABITA SALEH

You go out to have lunch with your friends. Checking the menu, you spot a “Student Meal” which, fortunately for you, is the cheapest item. It’s always a nice touch when you see such measures taken by restaurants because it feels like they are being considerate towards your budget. You smile and order the beef cheese burger with fries and a Coke. Life is good.

Except, it isn’t. You have not had a properly nutritious meal in a long time. You don’t think you have the time, or the resources, to truly worry about having balanced meals. You’re young. You think it’ll be ok. But will it really?

“Student meals” in Bangladesh is synonymous with unhealthy food. In the fast-paced nature of student life, proper nutrition can’t always keep up. We asked several students what their daily meals looked like, and this is what they said:

“Most of the time I have my meals outside campus because I don’t like the food in our cafeteria. I mainly have burgers, pizzas, or rice meals. However, if I am short on time and have to pick from the canteen, I prefer desserts like *kheer* to suppress my hunger. When I don’t feel like having dessert, then dry foods like sandwich or patties work fine for me,” says Dawood Yaseen, fourth-year CSE student at North South University.

“On most working days, lunch is the most neglected and inconsistent meal for me. I often find myself skipping lunch altogether. But usually, I snack on whatever is cheap and accessible, mostly, fast food like fries and *shingara* to suppress my hunger. I rarely go to the university cafeteria as I don’t prefer the food,” says Abdullah, a senior at BRAC University.

The most important reasons for this situation are the tight budget which most students have to live on, and the sheer lack of healthy options. Considering the regular university cafeteria meals available, an alarming pattern becomes apparent: the food mostly consists of carbohydrates, very often of the fried variety, fats, and some proteins, which are also not prepared in a hygienic environment. If a vegetable is ever spotted, there is almost always a generous batter of the ever-fried carbohydrates to lather it in. Trying to find a moderately filling healthy meal becomes an uphill battle from the get-go.

“On some days to kill hunger I choose to have *jhalhuri*. There indeed is variety of food at canteens throughout the campus but not everything is reasonably priced. The closest canteen to my department has Chinese vegetable on their menu but is not healthy. They sell fruit juice but some of

them cost 80 taka a cup,” comments Anika Anjum, second-year student of Sociology at University of Dhaka.

When asked about what’s advertised as “student meals” in restaurants, and whether they are balanced meals, this is what they had to say:

“Our meals aren’t exactly very balanced. Majority of the food products available for us students at restaurants are carbohydrates and fatty foods,” says Mashiyat Binte Sharfuddin, final-year Marketing student at Jahangirnagar University.

“Student meals usually come cheap and easy. That usually means set fast food meals. In fact, many corners are cut in terms of balance and quality when it comes to student meals in order to make the pricing more competitive,” states Abdullah.

What is subjecting our bodies to this kind of unbalanced consumption doing to us? Shamsun Naher Nahid, Principal Nutritionist and Head of Department, BIRDEM, reveals the very real consequences that prolonged continuation of such a diet between the ages of 18 to 25 has on us at present, and in the future.

“After turning 18, ‘hall life’ becomes very common for the youth of our country. In halls, the food they have is not of very high quality. For breakfast, they usually provide *khichuri* or *porota*. Those living in halls who come from outside Dhaka usually consume these high-calorie foods and it slowly leads to obesity. Some students, especially those who are from Dhaka, tend to avoid these foods but a lot of them end up going to classes without any breakfast at all, leading to low glucose levels in their brain, and lack of concentration.”

“The quality of food at halls for lunch and dinner is equally low. Sometimes to avoid these foods students go to eat street food, or dine at hotels. However, unhealthy foods at hotels end up causing acidity and ulceration.”

“Students with unhealthy diets experience low energy levels. They cannot muster up the energy required to focus on their studies after classes. This affects their academic lives as well.”

“Foods available at halls provide very little vitamins and minerals, leading to a decrease in immunity. Furthermore, calorie-dense food leads to obesity, which is why we are also seeing early on-sets of diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and heart conditions these days, especially in the student population,” she states.

It’s blatantly obvious that we should not continue on this unhealthy path if we wish to live longer, more prosperous lives. There are certain steps that must be taken to

enable students to lead healthier lifestyles.

Universities should have subsidised, healthy meals that include fresh juices, fruits, salads, and vegetables in their options, and make these foods just as cheap, if not cheaper, as the unhealthy options.

Restaurants should also have nutrition/health information on their food. This is a common practice in many countries. The only reason we have not been able to establish such practices in our country yet are because of our attitudes, and lack of concern regarding our health in general. However, attitudes need to change if we are to become healthier as a people. Many people in our country still cannot fathom the concept of a salad being a stand-alone meal, and as Bangladesh moves towards becoming a more developed nation such ideals will have to evolve.

One particular attitude we have regarding food options is that only the affluent have the luxury of being health conscious. Having a salad for lunch is sometimes even perceived as being “pretentious” or “snooty”. We have to stop branding “health consciousness” as a mark of wealth. It may be difficult for many people to make healthy choices, but with the bountiful land that we have, our attitude should be “how can we make healthier options more affordable for the masses, and how can we make them think more about their health?”

Making people more concerned about health needs to be emphasised because in conversations with the students regarding the culture of food, a concept of particular interest arose.

“The food culture in our country is usually not the best in terms of balanced diets. Sources of fibre and vitamins like salads and fruits are extraordinary and not often consumed on a regular basis,” says Abdullah.

“No one wants to spend money on a vegetable platter outside home. Fast food is cheap and tasty,” mentions Sajid.

This brings us to the final piece of this sad puzzle. At the end of the day, even if the authorities take all possible measures, choosing to lead a healthier lifestyle is upon our own shoulders, and we need to make sure that if affordable, we personally choose the healthier options more often than we do the unhealthy one. Unhealthy food that tastes good should be an occasional indulgence, not a regular habit. We need to work in unison towards a solution that makes this choice affordable for the youth.

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