DEPRESSION

Need for Awareness

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The mystery of depression is not that it exists — the mind, like the body, may, at times, malfunction. Instead, the paradox of depression is its prevalence. While most mental illnesses are rare, depression is everywhere, as common as the flu. Every year, approximately 7 percent of us will be affected to some degree by this awful mental state that novelist William Clark Styron in his book 'Darkness Visible' described as a 'gray drizzle of horror.' Plagued by our pain, we will retreat from everything we otherwise enjoy. Some of us will stop eating while others will start eating too much. Sex will lose its appeal; sleep will become a frustrating pursuit. We will always be tired, even though we will do less and less. Life will lose its meaning. We will often think about death. For reasons not fully known to us, the human mind is sometimes tilted toward sadness and, as it turns out, needs medicine to rescue itself.

Dr Omar Rahman, US board certified psychiatrist, formerly faculty at Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health, now Vice Chancellor of Independent University, Bangladesh, says, "Like diabetes, depression is a disease. It is a biological problem. There are medicines and therapy for it. Mental illnesses are not any different than physical illnesses. Grief is not depression."

It was love at first sight for Anan, a graduate student of engineering in a Texas University and Faria, an undergraduate business major in Sydney, Australia when they met at a Bob Dylan concert at the zoo amphitheatre of Oklahoma City on August 15, 2001. Upon graduation in 2003, she immigrated to the US and moved in with him in June, 2004. They planned on getting married after buying a house. A modern day fairy tale couple, their friends called them.

Not quite.

A few months later, Anan felt that something was missing from their relationship. Faria did not like to do things she previously enjoyed doing—watching movies, eating out, shopping, cleaning, cooking and spending time with her partner. It was as if demons had possessed her soul. Anan thought that her 'bad mood' would go away with time and a change of circumstances. It didn't. They found themselves in a recursive loop of woe. Unable to make sense of her behaviour, Anan took her to a psychiatrist in 2010. She was diagnosed with chronic depression. Faria was in denial. They broke up in 2012.

Faria blames Anan for everything.

Dr Rahman says, "Depression affects all facets of our life. It not only affects the person, it affects family members and work."

Faria believed that she could get well with motivation and will power. But in reality, depression is an ailment that concerns both physical and emotional sides of a person.

"They cannot will themselves to become better and come out of depression. They need help," says Dr Rahman.

When a person's mood fluctuates and he or she goes through short lived emotional response to challenges in everyday life, people around him or her often mistake it for depression. Kamal U. A. Chowdhury, Associate Professor and Clinical Psychologist, Department of Clinical Psychology at University of Dhaka says, "Depressed people have great difficulty performing daily life activities; their work performance takes a serious dip and in case of students, academic performance starts to get low. Their relationship with friends, colleagues, relatives and even family member also gets seriously affected as it becomes increasingly difficult for others to communicate with a person with a negative attitude towards self and world."

It is a common illness worldwide, with an estimated 350 million people affected. Dr Rahman says, "If a person has been experiencing low mood for most of the time of the day for two weeks, we can say he or she has depression. Besides we have to see if the person is having any apathy. The patient has irregularity in sleep and appetite. Depression is not subtle in nature."

According to professor Chowdhury, 16.1 percent of the adult population and around 18 percent of children and adolescents suffer from different forms of mental health problems with varying levels of severity. Among this population 4.6 percent are found to be suffering from depression making it one of the most prevalent mental health problems in Bangladesh. In case of children and adolescents, a study reports a prevalence of 0.95 percent among the younger population.

"Depression can be genetic as well as the result of life experiences," says Professor Chowdhury. "A