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MINDMATTERS

Raising Awareness About Mental Health

SHABABA IQBAL

To this day, the Bangladeshi community struggles with the stigma of mental health disorders and treatment. While people openly seek professional treatment for a heart disease or a broken limb, their decision to seek help for their mental disorders is often kept secret, or completely ignored, owing entirely to the widespread devaluing in our community against people with mental health illnesses and the lack of understanding about mental health. Recognising this lack of mental healthcare facilities and the stigma surrounding mental health in Bangladesh, Sarah Fardeen, a psychotherapist with her own practice, and a lecturer of psychology at North South University, started MindMatters in July 2016. The mission of MindMatters is to spread knowledge about mental health and mental healthcare through campaigns to improve services, raise awareness, and promote understanding.

When asked what was her inspiration behind starting MindMatters, Fardeen says that she has always wanted to do something to address the stigma surrounding mental health, but there was one reason that encouraged her to take that next step: her students. "My students frequently said to me that the people around them would not take their mental health issues seriously at all, and that their parents would not allow them to go to counselors," says Fardeen, adding that the pressures of growing up to be overbearing for young people and their psychological health should be taken seriously.

Fardeen further explains that sadly, parents can be a harbor for stigma, and that they have a key role in developing their children's self-esteem. "Families are our first part of social support. So, even things like comparing your child-

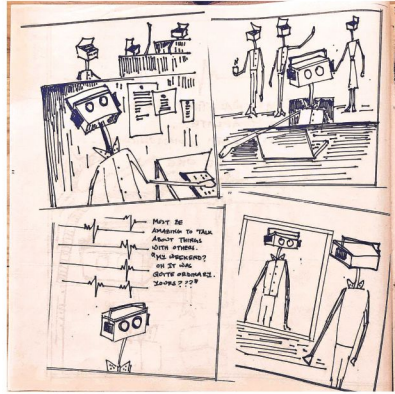
ren with others can be more damaging than one realizes."

Addressing the need for educating people about mental health, Mahi Nur Saif, the program manager of MindMatters and a student of North South University, explains, "I think we need to realize that emotional wounds and the way we speak can affect the way other people think and speak, and this is as important as our physical well-being." When people go through periods where their feelings and behaviours start to affect their life at home, school, or with friends in a negative way, they feel uncomfortable and ashamed to talk about it. This is something Fardeen hopes to change with MindMatters. "Our society widely shuns the topic of mental health, and people naturally want to blend in, so they avoid talking about it," explains Fardeen.

So, with MindMatters, Fardeen wants to raise awareness about mental health and address people with things that they usually like and are involved in, such as sports, arts, pop cultural entertainment, and food and nutrition.

The first program of this initiative was "Exploring MindMatters," a two-day art exhibition held in January this year, depicting common mental health disorders in visual form. The curator of this event was Katerina Don, who had previously been in charge of several exhibitions and catalogue publications, and who Fardeen met through a classmate.

The program was also a platform for hosting free workshops on mental healthcare and social support, and providing resources for counseling centers from all around Dhaka. Professionals in the mental health field led these workshops. Different artists, illustrators, comic creators, filmmakers, advertisers and visual designers took



part in the exhibition. They were: Saria Saguro, Kazi Ishtia Imam, Sayef Mahmud, Tanvir Ahmed, Nuhash Humayun, Mahnaz Chowdhury, Saiqa Chowdhury, Tabassum Islam Tanni, Malena Gomez, and Liza Hasan. To prepare and coach these artists prior to the exhibition, Fardeen arranged a presentation on common mental health issues such as suicide, split personality, dissociative identity disorder, schizophrenia, anxiety, and depression, among others. The artists used the knowledge they gained from the presentation to create something of their own based on these issues.

Tanvir Ahmed, a management executive by profession and artist by passion, created a zine for the exhibition. He explored social anxiety, and the fear of being judged and not accepted through the main character of the zine. "I find it intriguing how quickly we jump to conclusions about the 'quiet ones' in social settings. I've done the same almost subconsciously, because I was never aware of the perspective that maybe they are not quiet by choice," explains Tanvir. Kazi Ishtia Imam, a graphic designer, created a video installation to address her inner critic and issues of anxiety and her ways of deal-

ing with them through mind control and meditation.

The mission behind this exhibition of MindMatters was to instill a spirit of hope and to show that creating art gives people a platform to alleviate the pain of their reality and deal with their negative emotions.

Other activities of MindMatters include creative, inclusive campaigns and forums so people can start conversations about mental health, articles, videos and online tools to educate people about the root causes of why mental health is important, and a platform for people to share their own experiences of psychological struggles through different creative modes of expression such as poetry, short stories, photo projects, paintings, music, and open letters, among others. The MindMatters team also looks forward to hosting another art exhibition in the future.

Although MindMatters is a commendable step towards raising awareness about mental health, running an initiative of this nature can be challenging, Fardeen asserts. "The hardest part is that most people do not cooperate and still don't want to have anything to do with mental health." However, the positivity is not lost. "I think this is a start. People have come up to me and said that our event had changed their perception about mental health, and that the artworks spoke to them," says Fardeen. Stigma is still not gone. We are often quick to ostracise and make someone feel insignificant just because his or her behaviour is a little different than the rest of us. We tend to forget that these people we shun may remember that one single event for the rest of their lives. Mental illnesses and the stigma surrounding them are challenges we need to tackle together.

LITMOSPHERE

The secret book club

RASMIA RAHMAN AMREEN

Have you ever felt that your habit of reading books is gradually decreasing, as we advance towards a world where gadgets take up most of our attention?

Do you miss the experience of flipping through and smelling the pages of a novel or a poetry book as you read, yet somehow cannot seem to make time?

Or, Are you planning on taking up reading as a hobby, however, are not motivated enough?

If you have answered 'yes' to at least one of the above three questions, then behold! Good news awaits! Just as Hogwarts exists within the realms of secrecy, a secret Facebook group called 'Litmosphere' has been nurturing and motivating avid readers since August 31, 2016. The aim of this group is to bridge a connection amongst



regular readers in Bangladesh and create a healthy community of book lovers. The interactive platform is designed to let one share their thoughts, feelings, reviews, suggestions, blogs, creative writings and even jokes regarding any book of choice. Rubaiya Chowdhury, the founder of Litmosphere,



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says, "I wanted to create an atmosphere where people would reclaim back the art of reading books and share their opinions with each other without the fear of being judged."

Rubaiya along with her sister, Ramisa Chowdhury, and friend, Arham Siddiquee, have been running and maintaining the group since day one. Initially, they started by inviting family members and friends. Gradually, the group gained popularity and is now home to almost 2.5 K closet readers.

On July 15, Litmosphere took the initiative of arranging a "Meet and Greet" event in Chittagong city, where 30 members of the group took part. Besides spending time taking part in various fun and interesting activities, the book lovers also received lovely gifts courtesy of the sponsors. "Al-

though most of the members are from Dhaka, we still decided to hold the first introductory event in Chittagong because we felt that this city seldom gets the focus and attention it deserves. However, the second event is soon to take place in Dhaka. That too, on a bigger scale!" Rubaiya expresses with excitement.

Litmosphere has arranged for the second meet and greet session on August 4, 2017, in Dhaka. Payment and registration details about Dhakayaya Lit Meetup can be found in the Litmospherefacebook group.

Even though the group is still a secret on Facebook and it operates within the club only, the founders of the group do plan to make it open in the near future as soon as they find more young readers interested to join, not only in Dhaka and Chittagong but also other parts of Bangladesh.

Promoting art through Calligraphy

TABASSUM BINTE TABRIZ

Calligraphy has been practiced for a very long time in many parts of the world, including ours. Many used this art form to create special signatures showcasing identity and harmony. Volunteer for Bangladesh, Dhaka District (VBD) recently organised a Calligraphy competition for the third time this year, from July 24 July - 25, 2017. The event was held at the EMK Centre.

The aim of this event was to mainly promote Calligraphy on a wide range. People from different sectors sent in almost hundreds of artworks. From outside Dhaka, calligraphy writings poured in from Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi and Comilla. Out of all the submissions, only 95 calligraphies were selected to be showcased at the EMK centre at Dhanmondi.

The Madrasah students have always been deprived when it came to educational, arts and

other sectors in the country. Another aim of this event was to bring out the hidden talents of such students. In fact, the art of Calligraphy is practiced more at the Madrasahs than any where else. Through this competition, the organisers received submissions from at least ten or more Madrasah institutions. "It's a great platform for the Madrasah students to showcase their talents," says A G Mutasim Islam, President, VBD Dhaka district.

Prizes and certificates were handed over to the winners on 25 July, late afternoon.

The first prize went to Sabia Nawshreen, doing her masters in Pharmaceutical Technology at University of Asia Pacific; second prize went to Fahiba Bushra, a final year Islamic Studies student from Southeast University and the third prize went to Homayra Tasfia from Gazipur Girls College.

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