

WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY

# Breaking mental health barriers in the workplace

BUSHRA ADEL

**L**AST week I experienced a tremendous amount of emotional upheaval and mental pressure, finally feeling the brunt of juggling my master's thesis and work. In a moment of weakness, or probably courage to open up about my emotions, I let my supervisor know about my struggles. She suggested that I take a month off from work and come back refreshed. I obviously did a double-take; hardly anyone gets consideration for more than a couple of days for missing work due to physical ailments. And here I was, bewildered that my mental state was given consideration.

Today marks 25 years of celebrating World Mental Health Day. The anniversary is expected to shed some extra light on the day's celebrations, which made it all the more important to choose a theme, as with every year, that would highlight an indispensable concern related to mental health. It was thus decided that the theme would be "Mental Health in the Workplace", which would no doubt seem strange to many Bangladeshis. It isn't that there is anything wrong with the theme, but the very concept of an employee's mental health being given significance would be an alien thought.

Unfortunately, national surveys will not be able to support my assertion since there weren't any conducted regarding a workplace's capacity in promoting good mental health. The only statistic available, a staggering yet neglected one at that, has been off-repeated over mental health related articles published every few months: According to the National Mental Health Survey conducted by WHO in 2003-2005 about 16.05 percent of the adult population in the country are suffering from mental disorders. ICDDR,B's review in 2014 bumped that number to a prevalence range between 16-31 percent. Regrettably, the inference that can be

drawn is that up to 50.5 million Bangladeshis are either unemployed, or are actively hiding their mental illness related issues at work.

National laws are also deprived of any protection for persons with such conditions in their jobs. Bangladesh is continuing to follow the Lunacy Act of 1912. The Mental Health Act 2016 Draft which was slated to be incorporated this year only mentions that companies are to be punished under the Criminal Act, without any guidelines as to the circumstances of the said penalty.

In comparison, Australia, a nation championing the cause of mental health with mental health policies even for companies set in place, has these numbers. One in five Australians (21 percent) have taken time off work in the past 12 months because they felt stressed, anxious, depressed or mentally unhealthy. This resulted in a loss of USD 4.7 billion in absenteeism. From this alone we are able to clearly witness the direct costs of harbouring mental health conditions and the loss ensued if not being treated and given the opportunity to get better.

The notion that a stigma around mental health exists only among the uneducated and poor is broken by the existing practices in our workplaces. In the case of jobs, employees are expected to deliver work based on their skills, rational thinking and capacity to adapt to the demands of their work. If one's mental health related struggles are cited as reasons for being absent or for not completing a task, as opposed to mentioning a physical form of illness, the person's abilities come under doubt. A direct correlation is made between the employee's mental state and their aptitude, or lack thereof.

"I couldn't imagine telling my supervisor that I was unable to take classes due to my bouts of depression," my friend who used to teach at a school two years back and is currently under the care of a clinical psychologist for

her depression shares with me. "It wasn't that my condition was perpetually hampering my work. But during the few times that it was, I had to actively mask it and fake having a fever or cold to allow myself some time out. I would come back with a fresh start and make up for lost time. Yet if the depression factor was known, I'd be labelled as incompetent."

Many organisations can easily say that they have not come across any workers having distinct mental health issues. The fact is that an environment

the natural state of affairs.

Let alone diagnosed illnesses, direct work-related stress and anxiety are not given any space to be mitigated. Commute within the capital and its outskirts brings with it a constant state of worry of reaching one's destination on time. The cramped cubicle setting of 9-to-5 jobs leaves very little time for relaxation. With the international trend of open workplaces with provisions for gyms, swimming, etc. one will find it difficult to find conservative workplaces having even a break room. Apurba has

bring their work home. Saturdays have lost the position as a weekend holiday. Constant communication via emails, Facebook and WhatsApp between managers and workers ensures that no one is able to escape their jobs. Any semblance of a balance between personal and work life becomes non-existent.

Not all has been lost yet. The move of companies adopting the "social enterprise" approach and the rise of youth-led start-ups and organisations have seen a slow yet progressive shift towards adopting a work environment catering to the wellbeing of workers, both physical and mental. Co-working hubs like Moar and InHouse incorporate nature and openness into their office space with greenery and glass fittings to allow a view of the outside. BRAC's Social Innovation Lab situated on the 21st floor seems like an oasis with an open floorplan and arrangements on the balcony for both meeting and taking breaks. "The open environment allows us to communicate better with our colleagues," says Salman Sabbab, iProjects Officer at SIL. "We get to share ideas and build our own, and it helps us be more enthusiastic and productive."

There are many reasons for propagating the need for mental health to be addressed as an issue in the workplace today. A major factor is that many cases go unnoticed until they become severe. While many employers are now geared up to spot signs of physical illness, mental health problems can be more difficult to identify. It's important to safeguard the mental health of the workforce by creating an open and caring culture that makes staff feel supported and looked after.

Bushra Adel is the Programme Director of Identity Inclusion, a programme geared towards countering mental health stigma and promoting community based services and inclusion of people with psychosocial disability.



In Bangladesh, mental health in the workplace is yet to get the attention it deserves. PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

driven by lack of information, misinformation and stigma compels workers to actively hide their psychological issues. It would also be too harsh to fully put the blame on the employers. While companies of all shapes and sizes increasingly understand the importance of good mental health compared to the yesteryears, many simply don't feel confident handling and communicating these issues in the workplace. A "don't ask, don't tell" approach to mental disorders becomes

been diagnosed with obsessive phobia and states, "We don't even have a lunch hour. In between work and meeting, we're told to take 10 minutes out to finish up our lunch. I've skipped them many times since I'd rather put my head down and rest than eat."

While technological advancements have given many the freedom to freelance, the constant connectivity has disallowed employees to leave their work at their work stations. Work hours in many settings extend well beyond 5pm, and even afterwards many have to

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# Most vulnerable Rohingyas left by the wayside

Better organised services are needed to deal with this manmade crisis

KAZI AMDADUL HOQUE

**D**RIVING south from Cox's Bazar along the marine drive, it is impossible not to be struck by the beauty of the sea on the right and the hills on the left. But before long a few lost and disoriented-looking faces appear until eventually the highway is lined with thousands of them.

Some of them break down as they tell us the horrors they have witnessed: the Myanmar army and angry locals setting fire to their houses, killing family members in front of them, taking girls away to rape, throwing children into the fire, and slaughtering people. Their journey to Bangladesh was like a nightmare—painful and uncertain. On the way, they heard the shots and mine explosions that killed their people near the border. Many saw overcrowded boats with panicked passengers capsizing. Many of them, including children, walked across forests and hills for several days before they could get on a boat to Bangladesh.

On the way to Shah Porir Dwip, one of 20-30 entry points of Rohingyas to Bangladesh, I imagined (since Bangladesh had announced its intention to welcome Rohingyas fleeing the violence in Myanmar) that we might find volunteers helping the fleeing Rohingya people off the boat to a shaded booth or a drink of water. After the arrivals were recorded and their biometrics taken, a shuttle service would take each family to their assigned camp. They might even receive a token, and information about where to get medical care, food and other services. Perhaps even a message of solace:

"No worries, you are safe now." But unfortunately, most of the thousands arriving—pale, malnourished, traumatised and broken-hearted—were far from finding relief. On our first trip to the border after the disaster, our team found aged women and mothers with newborns at their breast, lost and disoriented among lakhs of unknown

his mother's lap. The parents were not asking anyone for help, just staring blankly at everyone passing them. They had been in the same place for two days, with no money to pay for transit to a camp. I touched the baby and felt burning temperature and unusual breathing which clearly indicates pneumonia. I took them back to Teknaf with me. On arrival,



Thousands of Rohingya children and adolescents are in need of counselling to cope with the trauma. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

faces in an unfamiliar land. Despite an immense outpouring of aid from across the country, and generous efforts by the local community, these people were afraid and had no idea where to get basic services.

At the boat station, I met a family with a baby, Mohammed Omar of eight months, on

I had to leave them with some cash and whatever directions I learned from the locals.

We came upon another woman who had collapsed on the road. After one of our medics attended to her, she told us that she had crossed the border with her family. For two days they stayed put without food, so as not to lose their

spot. Eventually her husband took their children to go look for food. They never returned. After waiting for half the day, she set out to find them. She roamed until she collapsed.

None of these people were suffering due to lack of aid. In fact, host communities have selflessly donated food, clothing, and even shelter in their own homes. Compassionate members of the Border Guard Bangladesh have given incredible support to asylum seekers. Many young people had organised spontaneously at the camps. At Balukhali makeshift camp, we saw volunteers of Cyclone Preparedness Programme on duty. However, there is no organised system for asylum seekers, particularly the disabled, elderly, pregnant women and mothers with infants, to access these services.

The army, to their credit, is distributing a vast amount of aid in a systematic way. But it requires recipients to stand in line for hours, often in the scorching heat. I met mothers with infants at their breast who were unable to stand in line, and therefore had not eaten for days. There are days when there is surplus food, but many still have no access to it.

Within a month of the unfolding of the disaster, the army set up booths at a few entry points. This is a huge improvement from when we first visited the area and found them taking biometrics near Kutupalong makeshift camp, which is between five and 40km from the various entry points.

However, we could benefit from extending coverage to each of the entry points where undocumented Myanmar nationals are arriving. Besides this, ensuring the new arrivals are taken care of is to our own advantage, as it can prevent future crises.

It is possible for the government to manage the new arrivals so that they have a comprehensive record of those who have crossed the border and the location of these individuals or families—making it easier to maintain security in the area. At the same time, we would also be able to minimise the misery of the families separated or stranded before reaching makeshift shelters.

Many arrive needing immediate medical assistance due to their injuries. Some are of old age, are pregnant, or suffer from some kind of disability. Ensuring that these people get basic healthcare when they enter means we can avoid more expensive treatment down the line.

An overwhelming number of women who have fled the violence have been raped, and need reproductive and sexual healthcare. If the Department of Family Planning and associated agencies provide contraceptives and specialised care, we can avoid a population increase in the future and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, while ensuring the good health of newborn children. Furthermore, a space to provide support and counselling for children and adolescents could help them cope with trauma.

Bangladesh is well-experienced in managing disasters. We have been able to quickly evacuate entire habitations during a crisis and arrange shelters for the affected. Applying our experiences and mobilising our resources can help us to tackle this manmade disaster.

Kazi Amdadul Hoque is the Director for Strategic Planning and Head of Disaster Management at Friendship NGO, and has over 22 years of experience in public health and community development.

## A WORD A DAY

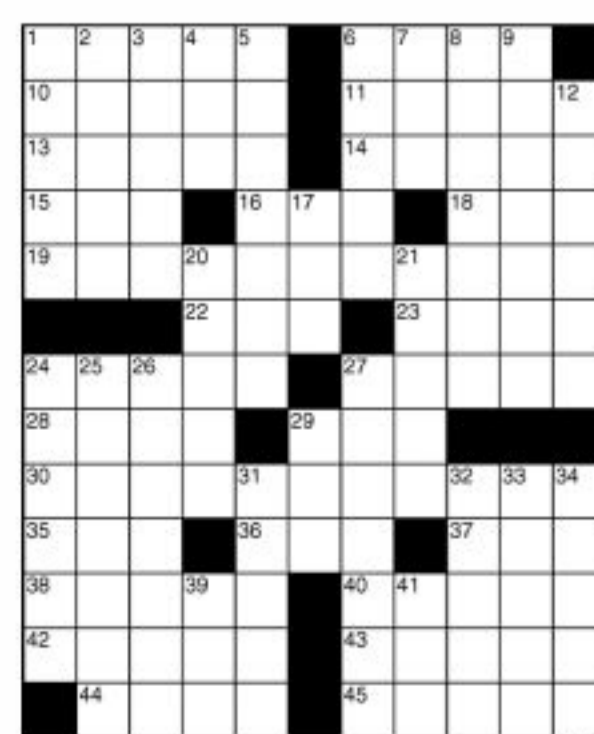


**ERGONOMICS**  
noun

The study of people's efficiency in their working environment.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Con games
  - 6 Easy gait
  - 10 Insertion sign
  - 11 Without break
  - 13 Singer
  - Cara
  - 14 Mountain group
  - 15 Summer cooler
  - 16 Reuben bread
  - 18 [Not my spelling]
  - 19 Pinot Grigio, e.g.
  - 22 Shade tree
  - 23 Kitchen appliance
  - 24 Very serious
  - 27 Wave's top
  - 28 Romantic flower
  - 29 Drill part
  - 30 Long sandwich
  - 35 Golf goal
  - 36 Fabric color
  - 37 Pet perch
  - 38 Piano piece
  - 40 Corn
  - 42 Writer
  - Ephron
  - 43 Take, as advice
  - 44 Bears' lairs
  - 45 Prophets
- DOWN**
- 1 Verne specialty
  - 2 Gem unit
  - 3 Sports spot
  - 4 Fellows
  - 5 Like surgical tools
  - 6 Oscar winner Sophia
  - 7 "Not—dare!"
  - 8 Deep in thought
  - 9 Train pullers
  - 12



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER



## BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



## BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

