

## SPECTRUM

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## Shattering the savant myth

I hope from the last article the complex nature of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is starting to become clear. It is important to remember that it is not binary, that it is not as clear cut as you either have it or you don't: it is more a case that you can have traits which define some aspects of ASD.

This time I would like to discuss one of the largest and most prevalent misconceptions about ASD — the idea of a savant, someone who has a specialised skill or ability in a particular area that could be considered 'abnormal' or outstanding.

It is difficult to state where this idea that people with ASD are inherently gifted with a particular skill or ability originated. However, a popular example of this from film would be Dustin Hoffman's brilliant portrayal of Raymond in the 1988 movie Rain Man.

In the film Hoffman plays an individual with ASD who has an extreme skill with numbers, so much so that he can accurately count and keep track of cards while his brother, who ultimately takes advantage of the savant abilities displayed by Raymond, plays blackjack at a casino.

There is no accurate number or study which focuses on the prevalence of savant syndrome in a population with ASD. It is recognised by

most researchers that the occurrence of such individuals is exceedingly rare.

The other major issue with the savant syndrome is that it is not at all specific to ASD. There are multiple cases of savant syndrome appearing in individuals either after a brain injury or even in patients suffering from dementia.

The main reason it is important to explore these misconceptions is because they can place an unreasonable expectation not only on the individuals with ASD but also the primary caregivers of these individuals.

The concept behind these articles is to introduce people to the reality of ASD and what living with the condition can involve; part of this means tackling misconceptions, especially like the savant syndrome.

It may just be easier to accept the circumstances of the disability if the individual is thought to have this 'special' skill however in most cases this is simply not true. Recognising that fact and accepting that the condition is a lot more complex makes it that much easier to speak about the condition and to open up the conversation to include both a population with ASD and one without.

The reality is that ASD, especially in its most severe cases, can prove to

be enormously challenging, for both caregivers and the individuals themselves. It can be extremely frustrating to try to understand the wants and needs of individuals affected by ASD, especially when communicating that to the caregivers is something they may inherently have difficulty with. Therefore, the more we confront the realities of ASD as opposed to blindly accepting the misconceptions, the closer we get to having a more meaningful and helpful understanding of it.

A more informed understanding is possibly the most efficient way in opening up a dialogue between those with ASD and those without. This means that we can work together in creating a deeper understanding of why people suffering from ASD have certain difficulties and collaborate with them to develop solutions to problems faced by ASD sufferers every day.

*This article is a continuation of "Let's talk about autism" run on Tuesday, October 17, 2017. As the series continues, we hope to address some of the more important issues related to the disorder. To read the first part of the series, please log onto: [www.thedailystar.net/lifestyle/lets-talk-about-autism-1477357](http://www.thedailystar.net/lifestyle/lets-talk-about-autism-1477357)*

## FYI

## Hatirjheel Dog Walkers Club

Having a pet is a huge commitment; some might say, it is no less than having a child. Pets are your go-to companion and a friend you can always seek for comfort. The emotional bonding between an owner and a pet is a strong and inexpressible feeling. Just as we spent time taking care of them, one of the most important things that might slip off from our minds is the fact that your pet (especially if it is a dog) might need to go out for a walk more than one can think.

Nadia Sikder, an animal and human rights activist has taken the initiative of gathering all animal lovers and pet owners who live close to Hatirjheel to form a small group named "Hatirjheel Dog Walkers Club" and interact in order to form friendship and regular routine to walk their dogs. "The initiative is very simple, yet the bond that the owner and pet will grow, through this small step will be outstanding," said Nadia as we walked along with her pet down the path in Hatirjheel.

She has been walking her dog quite regularly for the past seven years and believes that it helps both



of her pets to relief the pent-up energy they often retain. "Living in an apartment and finding places to walk pets might be very difficult at time but through forming a small community of dog walkers the situation might seem easier than said!" she further states.

Just like humans, dogs do not like being confined in the same environment. They thrive for small 'adventures' and friendly games with their owners. It is important that the friendship between you and your

little pawed friend become more outgoing and exciting.

Join Nadia Sikder in her group to communicate with more outgoing animal lovers to share ideas and experiences. Let there be many walks for you to remember!

By Sumaiya Tasnim

Photo: Kazi Nayeer

Model: Nadia Sikder and Simba

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