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seek counselling support, the BRAC University Counselling Unit provides counselling services in consultation with the student, the guardian, and the psychiatrist."

It appears that the institution relies on self-reporting to identify and assist those most at risk. But it is often difficult, if not impossible, for those struggling with their mental health to take the active step to reach out to counsellors, especially if and when they are contemplating self-harm and given the widespread stigma surrounding mental illness.

And the problem of insufficient attention to and support about mental health isn't only restricted to BRACU, as the second part of this cover story (in the next page) highlights. Universities across the country—and students too—ought to take this moment to re-evaluate how they can create a better support system, eliminate mental health stigma on their campus, and promote a pluralistic and tolerant environment that is conducive not just for some but for all. They must find a better mechanism to reach out to those at-risk. Mental health must become a priority for those who need support, and those who can at least lend their ears.

How does the university deal with students who are clinically diagnosed with depression or other mental health disorders? Suhrid answers, "BRACU does not have a psychiatrist, so we do not provide psychiatric clinical diagnosis. However, if any student or their guardians inform us that the student is seeing a psychiatrist and



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAH SIN AGAZ APURBO

| SPOTLIGHT |

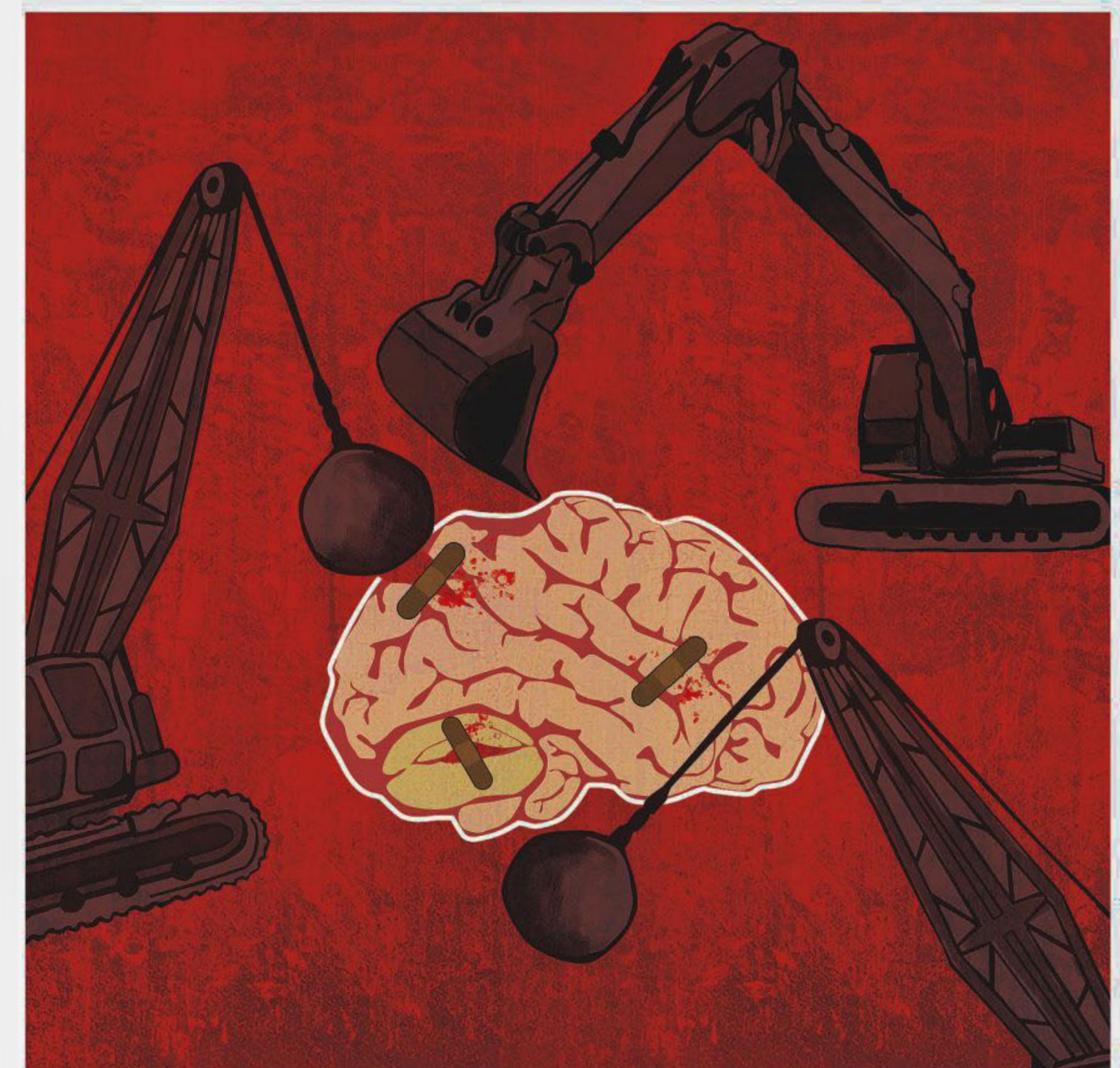


ILLUSTRATION: NAHTA JAHAN MONNI

THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT

But educational institutions don't seem to care

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY & NILIMA JAHAN

The recent cases of suicide in educational institutes this year—nine cases of suicide at University of Dhaka (DU) and one at a residential complex of a private university—has opened a can of worms, exposing how poorly the mental health condition of Bangladesh's youngsters are dealt with.

On November 14, Laila Anjuman Eva, a student of the Home Economics Unit of DU, took her life in a rented room at Azimpur which she shared with a roommate. *Star Weekend* talked to Shrobona Shafique Dipti, Eva's friend.

"She was a very talented individual.

Involved in theatre, art, and other things. But you know what, she was also bitterly unhappy. She had a divorce at a young age and her father had stopped speaking to her for the last six years on account of it. She attempted suicide multiple times before, but we just never thought that she would..." Dipti trails off.

Zakir Hossain, a student of Disaster Management of DU, hailing from a remote village in Rangpur, took his life on October 15, just a month before Laila.

"You could tell he worked hard to get here. He was so full of hope when he joined this university. But over the course

of time, he was finding it harder and harder to cope with the competitive environment at DU. He soon started missing classes regularly and was unable to fit in with his peers," said one of Zakir's friends, Topu Raihan*.

Zakir went back to his village home in September, and after a fight with his parents, committed suicide.

It is not just personal issues that drive children to their untimely deaths. The country's current state of affairs is also to blame, at least on the onset. Mushfiq Mahbub, a fourth-year student of the Department of Music at DU, committed suicide on August 15 after he posted on social media criticising the government and the education system of the country. News reports published after his death say he was frustrated and disturbed with the education system and he would often say this to his friends.

Unfortunately, none of the nine students who committed suicide this year had reached out to university's Student Counselling and Guidance Office, which is responsible for providing counselling and arranging workshops for mental health services. This raises the question, is help really

Then there are the dorm tutors who are supposed to look after the students but in effect, actually end up isolating them, according to some students. "One of my juniors, a topper at her department, had to leave the dormitory just because she was caught smoking in her room. Her roommates rebuked her, some even wanted to beat her up and eventually ended up complaining to the dorm tutor. Then followed a series of phone calls to her guardian and she ended up having to attend classes from her home all the way in Narayanganj. Her results took a sharp blow. And the last time I met her, she told me how she had grown distant from her conservative parents, is bitterly depressed now and wants to end her life."

"But you see, this could be handled in a much more professional manner and this young, bright student did not have to suffer for such a trivial action," says Lima Islam*, a student of Economics at DU.

NOT AN ISOLATED CASE

The problem isn't limited to just DU. Students of many reputed private universities claim that their mental health services are either not up to the

mark or simply non-existent.

Moazzem Hossain, Principal of Dhaka College reiterates Khurshida's sentiments. The facilities they have for mental health services is not sufficient.

Students in the school however do attend seminars and workshops on creating awareness on mental health problems. But how effective are they?

Aseeya has been to many such seminars, but she doesn't believe they help much.

"They keep making us attend these useless seminars on mental health issues, in the hopes that it will somehow, magically cure us of our depression, anxiety, homesickness, stress or whatever it is we are suffering from," says the university student.

The Aga Khan School's guidance counsellor, Syeda Khurshida Mun-e-Mu explains that students face a complex variety of problems ranging from bad breakups and different addictions to social anxiety and even exam phobia.

"Currently the service is very limited in its capacity. I get to give a student (patient) 20 minutes at most and this does not give me an in-depth understanding of their problems," says Khurshida.

"Even though, slowly very slowly, students and parents are realising the need for mental health intervention from early childhood, the change is unfortunately only something that we are seeing in the better-off of the society," she adds.

The problem in Bangladesh is not just insufficient facilities, it is also that the number of mental health caregivers are very few and numbered, says Khurshida.

*Names of the students have been changed.



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