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Discussions around and understanding of mental health is still limited in Bangladesh, and campuses, unfortunately, are no exception. To BRACU's credit, at the Dhaka campus, there is an active psychosocial counselling unit, comprising nine professional counsellors.

"If a student feels any kind of mental health related problem, they go and talk to the counsellors. Sometimes faculty members, peers, and guardians also refer students for counselling especially when there is any noticeable sign of decline in academic performance. The issues/challenges that the BRAC University Counselling Unit addresses include parenting concerns, academic concerns, adjustment issues, addiction, stress and burn out, goal setting, social and communication skills, etc.," explains Suhrid.

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

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.

SPOTLIGHT

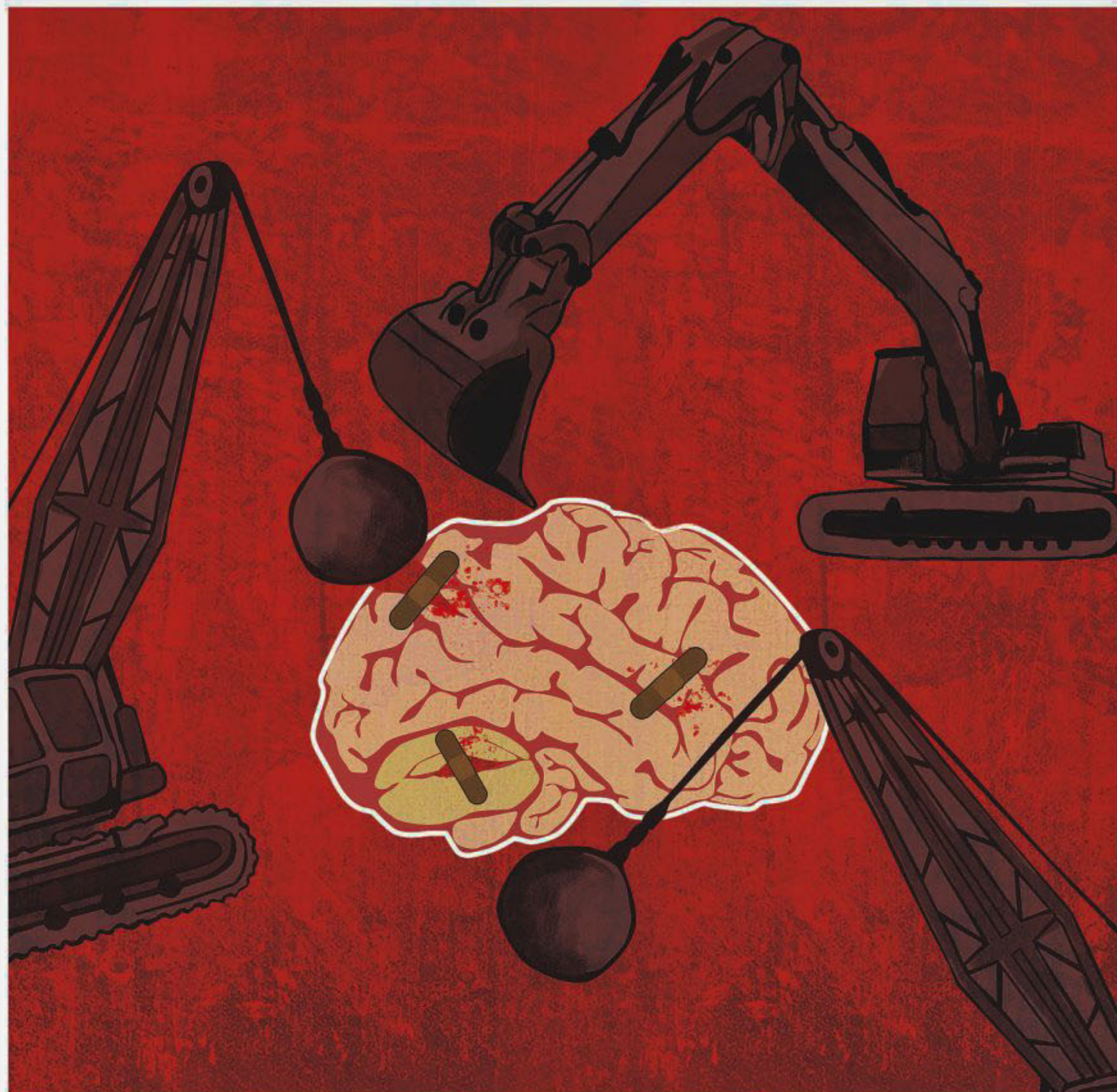


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

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

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reaching the right students—those most at risk?

"At least 500 students sought help from us in the last year or so," says Dr Mehjabeen Haque, director of the Student Counselling and Guidance Office at DU, but admits that the number should be much higher in proportion to the number of students who currently study here.

According to Dr Haque, each year the number of students seeking help is growing. "The most common issues discussed in our sessions are: depression, fear of unemployment, relationship crisis, homesickness, and inability to adjust to both the education standards and the life here in Dhaka," she adds.

A student who sought help from the counselling centre, however, laments on the complex process of actually getting help—a student has to get a serial and collect a token (which takes 3 to 4 days). There is no immediacy to the service—but that is the thing with suicidal thoughts, they need immediate attention.

In addition to the counselling centre, in each female students' dorm there are psychologists who are ready to help anyone in need, claims Dr Haque. Students, however, say they have never come across such a service.

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 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. The case of 22-year-old Aseeya* is one such example. She tells me how she simply could not bring herself to go to the designated counsellor at her university (a reputed private university in Dhaka), because of the stigma attached to it.

The counsellor's office is in plain sight, around which her classmates often hang out. And despite suffering from anxiety and anger management issues, in addition to dealing with a sick father and financial troubles, she could never bring herself to make a visit to the counsellor's room more than once.

She blames it on two things. First, the counselling itself which she thinks is ineffective. Second, she thinks the office is very unwelcoming and the counsellors just ask whoever visits them to be friendlier and to hang out with friends to feel better. She also thinks that her peers do not have the most basic awareness about mental health problems, and will tease her, if they find out she goes to the counsellor.

The situation is as bad in the city's schools and colleges. Shahan Ara Begum, Principal of Motijheel Ideal School and College, established in 1965, which currently has around 21,000 students, admits their school

does not have a formal service to support students suffering from mental health issues. 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-ee-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.

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

"Our psychology department conducts free seminars with an external teacher of psychology," explains Moazzem.

"If anyone has a mental health issue, he can come to the psychology department. This is very private matter, and as far as I know, four to five boys came to one of our psychology teachers and took counselling from them. Even though we want to, we cannot help everyone in need basically for lack of accommodation and manpower."

A number of other educational institutions we spoke reiterated the fact that most of them deal with mental health issues on an ad-hoc basis. A teacher identifies a problem, reports it to the authorities who then let the guardians know—which is essentially how far the institution is willing to take responsibility of their wards.

That facilities, while some available, are vastly inadequate is no question at all. The question, however is, who is responsible for the deaths of our children? The institution which struggles to deal with such issues, the society which outcasts anyone with a mental health problem terming them as "pagol" or the policymakers whose silence on this matter is deafening to say the least?

*Names of the students have been changed.



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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