

Mental health issues among university students: what makes it worse in this pandemic?

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The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted people's quality of life and deteriorated their mental health. And this situation has been a period of upheaval for young people and university students who are known to be vulnerable in the case of developing mental disorders. We have talked to some teachers and students to know about their perspective on the deteriorating mental health conditions of students at the university level.

What have faculties told about mental health issues among university students?

"Uncertainty is the main cause behind these students' depression and anxiety. When you don't know what is going to happen next, you'll be anxious thinking about the upcoming risk factors naturally. Most of the students were enjoying the unprecedented vacation initially, and so were most teachers. But when it got stretched over a long period without any certain update, they started to feel trapped in depression," said Tahia Anan Dhira, Lecturer of Economics department, Dhaka University. Nahid Salma, Assistant Professor of Statistics, Jahangirnagar University mentioned that staying at home for a long period of time detached from everything, career-related insecurities, spending too much time on social media, and negative change in the sleeping pattern are the main causes behind deteriorating mental health condition of university students.

On the other hand, Rubaiya Murshed, lecturer of Economics, Dhaka University, shared her experience and said, "The

most common mental health problems that I have observed among students are: anxiety and frustration about the uncertainty, fear of failure, anger, self-doubt, helplessness, fear of societal pressure and the fear of falling behind peers."

What have students shared about their mental health issues?

"The never-ending uncertainties, regarding when classes will resume and I will graduate, often give me anxiety. These have obstructed my future plan and it's unbearable to imagine how I will cope up with the job market once I graduate. It sometimes makes me sad and disappointed thinking how we are spending our precious undergraduate years in our homes, without any new experience," said Emon Hasibul Hasan, an Economics student from Dhaka University. "As we, university students, are adults, our families generally expect that we would somehow contribute to our family expenses. But rather we are now more dependent on them for financial purposes. Moreover, this pandemic has increased our internet addiction leading to a communication gap with our families and friends. I frequently feel overwhelmed due to all these expectations and worries," said Sharada Chakraborty, another student from Dhaka University studying Psychology.

Students in universities face the overload of online exams and assignments along with new rules and regulations during this time. It has deteriorated mental health too. A student

from IUT named Mutiul Muhaimin said, "The pandemic didn't go well for me. There are no fixed schedules for online classes, and overloads of assignments and projects. But I have no time to take sufficient rest or break, and my sleeping pattern is totally messed up. At times, it even feels pathetic that some people are disappearing from my life due to lack of communication amid this pandemic." He also mentioned the inconsiderate behaviour of some faculties or respective authorities which have caused mental health problems to many university students in general. "We are burdened with tons of assessments and classwork all the time as an alternative to our conventional exams. This has forced immense academic pressure on us which sometimes becomes unbearable and makes us depressed. The pandemic has somehow ruined my predetermined career plan and I'm in a complete dilemma regarding what to do. On top of that nowadays I am always anxious thinking about my family members or friends who can anytime get infected with the deadly coronavirus", said Faria Meherin, a student of English at East West University.

Who are mostly facing such issues?

According to a study headed by Nahid Salma, students living in urban areas suffer from more stress than those living in rural areas. "Since most students who are in urban areas have more access to information and knowledge, they get the opportunity to understand both the actual Covid-19 situation and the broken

job market more deeply and it results in anxiety for them," she added. On the other hand, students in public universities are experiencing more depression and anxiety compared to those in private universities, as per a paper co-authored by Tahia Anan Dhira. She said, "Students in most private universities are not facing the session jam or the uncertainty to graduate late due to the pandemic. Moreover, a greater portion of students in private universities get partial or full financial support from their families. This kind of support is too low in the case of public university students."

What steps can be taken to help them come out from such vulnerable conditions?

Both Dhira and Rubaiya pointed out the importance of building mental health clinics or counselling units in universities for students where mental health experts will be available to support them 24/7 over online or offline. Both of them also added that the relationship between faculties and students should be more flexible so that they can approach their respective faculty anytime asking for help to get rid of depression and anxiety. Nahid suggested increasing the age limit of government jobs and ensuring job security to minimise university students' anxiety issues. Dhira further highlighted the necessity of providing financial support to the students who are in need. Besides, more open discussions on mental health should be advocated and we should break the taboos on this issue according to Rubaiya Murshed.

