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Ramadan and exam season

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This year, a large number of students have had to face the unfortunate moment when they received their exam routine and saw that Ramadan, a month that is supposed to be filled with festivities and devotion, has been imbricated by exams. Although the spirit of this holy month can never truly be suppressed, the extra pressure of having to rigorously study while you fast has its own set of complications.

It is very much true that the more active our brain is as we go on to solve question papers and memorise formulae, the more it becomes hungry for nutrition.

Studies have shown that when individuals fast, their cognitive performance can be impaired, especially for tasks that require sustained attention and working memory. However, the effects of fasting, at its core, depends on the individual. A lot of participants in a study done on university students of the Muslim faith report that they are better able to focus when they fast. It has also been said to improve long term memory and prevent cognitive disorders.

Eahsan Abedin, a recent graduate from St. Joseph Higher Secondary School says, “Fasting helped me focus in some respects as you had more time to concentrate on studies rather than making or helping to make a meal. However, the main problem for me was never food, it was feeling dehydrated during exams, as I was obviously nervous.”

The problem does not just stem from

the rigid timings for fasting and meals, but also from the content of said meals, especially the iftar since most students opt to study at a long stretch in the time between iftar and sehri. Food offered in traditional iftars are usually filled with saturated oils, refined sugars, and processed items, all of which are known to make people feel more fatigued.

Samin Ibteda Chowdhury, an A level student, claims “Ofentimes I think I’ll have a lot of energy after I break my fast so I will sit down to study then. But the contrary happens. I end up losing out on more energy after meals and feel too bloated, which hinders my focus on books.”

Growing up, my mother would always stock the pantry and fridge with various snacks and fruits when our exams were near. Before my O level exams we had also gone on a grocery store spree.

Thousands of students choose to fast around this time of the year, and there are many ways in which they can adapt their routine to suit the needs of their academics while managing the traditions of the month.

Firstly, you can tweak your diet to your advantage while fasting. Cut down on the traditional fried food during iftar and opt for more nutritionally rich meals by including simple carbohydrates and a variety of fruits and vegetables to your diet. Drink lots of fluids to stay hydrated. Introduce nuts into your diet, as they are rich in fats and allow you to store energy. Walnuts, almonds, and pistachios are also known to increase brain function and

memory power.

Furthermore, it is crucial to manage your time wisely. You can plan your study breaks around prayer times and during iftar to reduce the need for breaks through the rest of the day and allocate more hours to studying. Switch the topic you are studying every hour or so, since fasting can impair your ability to fixate on one subject for long periods of time.

Showering more often is a lesser known hack to keep ourselves cool on the heated summer days while also maintaining productivity, especially when feeling tired and low on energy from hunger. If needed, create a nap schedule and stick to it. Let your family members know about it in case the sound you set for your alarm somehow incorporates itself into your dreams and you oversleep.

In terms of environment, there are a couple of changes you can bring about to make your surroundings more equitable. Avoid studying in your bed, and see if you can set up a study space away from your bed. You feel tired more easily when your sleep schedule is shifted, and the temptation to sleep will be greater than ever. Don’t let the comfort of an empty bed get to you. Try to study at dining tables, which should be unused throughout the day before iftar, or at a station that is not in a bedroom.

Clean up your space before Ramadan begins as you will be less motivated to tidy things up once you start fasting, a cleaner workspace makes for increased productivity by decluttering your space and reducing distractions.

It is also wise to join an online study group at this time so you can hold yourself accountable, along with the others in the study group for your study schedule. However, be wary not to let the endless sessions on Discord turn into a hub for spilling more gossip than getting work done.

The communal side of Ramadan in our culture is one that is unlike any other. It brings a heightened sense of community and togetherness amongst students as well, which leads to greater number of social activities.

Fasting every day for 30 days, or at all, can become tiring and extremely difficult for students who also have to sit for exams during this season. Coupled with having to wake up early in the morning, the lack of replenishment depletes a lot of people’s energy and compromises their health, for which, they might opt out from fasting during Ramadan. They might also be concerned about their performance in the exams as board exams, especially international ones, often tend to take place around Eid. Therefore, we must remember not to make anyone feel pressurised or get coerced into fasting.

Reference:

Department of Internal Medicine, NBU (December 2022), *Effects of Fasting on Student Performance in Exams*

Koushin currently keeps 3 screens turned on in front of her to prevent the chance of a thought occurring. Replenish her fugitive attention span at koushinunber27@gmail.com

Ramadan and young professionals

SHOUT DESK

The perception of regular events taking place around you changes as you grow up. It’s a well-known reality that is nonetheless jarring, and for a young person shifting gears from a life of classes and exams to one of meetings and appointments, these changes can be a challenging thing to come to terms with.

In the life of a young Muslim Bangladeshi, Ramadan is more often than not a highlight of the year. As a child, you grow up dreaming of the time when you will be able to fast every day. The teenage years are spent learning the spiritual significance of the act, and also obsessing over one’s favourite items on the iftar menu. As a young person in high school or university, juggling classes and exams with the Ramadan schedule can be difficult, especially when a spanner is thrown into the works of a carefully balanced (or rather, imbalanced) sleep schedule with the addition of an extra post-midnight meal. Yet, it’s all part of the fun because all of this is done surrounded by family, where the burden of responsibility to keep things running doesn’t often fall on the youngest person in the household. A young person’s Ramadan can be a vibrant social affair too, as the opportunity exists to attend gatherings with friends and family, with schools extending long holidays for Ramadan and Eid.

But as the exuberance of youthfulness makes way for the dreary realities of

early adulthood, Ramadan changes in more ways than one. The festivities that took priority once upon a time have to be pushed back to the status of meagre entries on a routine. And the routine itself becomes a difficult game of whack-a-mole, where having to wake up for sehri might mean an incomplete night of sleep because getting to work early in the morning is necessary if one intends to get home on time for iftar.

“My sleep schedule has changed because I have to wake up early for sehri. I found it somewhat difficult because previously, as a student, I often had enough time to sleep after sehri but now I do not have that luxury as I need to go to the office,” said Faiaz Amin Khan, a recent graduate who is now a Junior Software Engineer at Samsung Research and Development Institute, Bangladesh.

Wasima Tanzim, 24, is a Management Trainee Officer, Content Development at Forethought PR, and she echoes this sentiment.

“Waking up early hasn’t really been the easiest. It is always a struggle, especially as work starts even earlier now. Although my workplace is a bit lenient in terms of timing, most workplaces aren’t. For them, it’s even harder,” she said.

“My sleep cycle was somewhat normal before Ramadan. I used to sleep around 12 and wake up at seven. But now, since I still need to wake up at seven and have sehri before that, I am trying to shift my sleep cycle from nine to three but till now

I have failed miserably. I went to sleep at 12 still, woke up for sehri and then at seven again and had to get 2 hours of sleep at work (luckily my office has a relaxation room for sleeping),” said Farhan Fuad, 24, a software engineer at a local tech firm.

Moving further along the day, the next struggle is the fight against Dhaka traffic to get to work on time, and then to make it back for iftar. Dhaka’s notorious traffic tends to get worse around Ramadan, especially for younger professionals on a budget who don’t have access to private transportation.

“Fighting for a place to keep my foot on public buses at the rush hour, especially after fasting for the whole day is not easy. Sometimes, I don’t make it in time for iftar and my parents are rightfully upset on those days,” added Farhan.

All of this leads to a level of physical exertion during Ramadan that young people would have been protected from during their student lives.

“I think it has gotten more difficult for me now because I have to work for 7 hours straight without any breaks. As a student, there would be breaks between classes and the overall hours I spent at school or university were lower,” said Faiaz.

Farhan agrees that Ramadan felt easier as a student, “In university, I wouldn’t have to be present strictly from 10 to 6. It was on average 5 hours per day and my university provided its own transportation, which made things much easier.”

This tiring reality leads to the situation where young people finally have to grow up when Ramadan is no longer about frequent iftar parties with family and friends or long shopping sessions on weekdays. The choice has to be made to keep up with the grind of work, and at the end of the day, the social and community aspect of Ramadan is what takes a hit.

“I definitely can’t meet friends and family during Ramadan as I used to in the past. Post-iftar hours are already tiring and an eight-hour office shift on top of it means I have hardly got any motivation and energy left to go out and socialise with others. I prefer staying home and trying to go to sleep early the next day,” said Farhan.

Shoaib Ahmed Sayam, 25, works as a journalist at The Daily Star. His work hours mean he can only have iftar with his family at home once in a while. “When I was younger, Ramadan was all about family. When I became a teenager, I had a lot of iftar and post-Taraweeh hang-outs with my friends. But growing up, getting a job, and the added responsibility has meant all I do during Ramadan now is wake up, get to work, have iftar there, and by the time I get home, most people’s days are over. It makes me a bit sad but I have also made peace with it as not much can be done.”

Perhaps, Wasima sums it up the best, “Ramadan or not, socialising has become significantly difficult anyway. It seems as though we have grown up.”



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