



ILLUSTRATION: FATIMA JAHAN ENA

# Breaking away from dysfunctional families

THE DEFINITIVE YOUTH MAGAZINE  
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**RUDAIBA MAHBUB AND  
RAIAN ABEDIN**

Our families play a huge role in who or how we are as people. These relationships affect us in our childhood, contribute to our growth, and give us the persona that we carry on for the rest of our lives. According to an article by *Turnbridge*, unhealthy or dysfunctional parenting has a high probability of resulting in children developing severe cases of a variety of psychological issues. In order to gain a better understand-

ing of this, a deeper look at conventional family structures is pertinent.

When talking about dysfunctionality in family structures, there can be uncertainty in how we perceive what they may be. Yet the effects of children growing up in dysfunctional households can be far-reaching, with many requiring years of professional support to simply break out of this toxicity. Even if the term “dysfunctional family” can be rather vague, there are certain symptoms that are always present within these households.

Faisal Ahmed Rafi, psychologist and founder of Faisal Ahmed Rafi and Associates, explains, “When a child does not feel loved or cared for in their family, or when they feel like they can’t share their stories with their family, that’s usually the biggest giveaway for a dysfunctional family. There is a myth where we assume that dysfunctional families are broken families where the parents have split up. In reality, most families that are dysfunctional are generally not like this. What they have instead, is a general lack of communication, intimacy and privacy, all of which can lead to both emotional and physical abuse. A child growing up in such a situation is affected not just mentally, but also in how they perform in their day-to-day activities.”

For deeper insight, Rain Annapurna, 24, a student of English Literature at University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh (ULAB) shares their story, “Growing up, when I saw my

friends with their families, their parents were not as restrictive as mine. I was practically raised in a coop as my parents have always acted paranoid. I was not allowed to go outside, make friends, or have fun. I had no idea what freedom was. Even as a grown up I was not allowed to go outside without my parents at all.”

In addition, living in a patriarchal society often forces members in the family to play specific roles, and certain cultural norms can be the cause for rise in dysfunctionality in families. Rafi explains, “Fathers are made to be moody and serious, and feared by everyone whereas mothers are always taking the brunt of the emotional trauma. When we propagate ideas like these, we create an unhealthy situation in the family.”

On this note, Rezwana Ahmed Aunu, 21, student at North South University, shares her experience at home, “My mother has anger issues and a tendency to think that she is always right. This led me and my brother to navigate ourselves around her emotional states, like by not being ourselves or even lying at times. Sometimes, it gets chaotic as trying to understand her emotional state can be tough. She would also restrict me from doing most things. My father was absent for the most part. He never had much of a say in how we grew up, my mother was the one taking care of these things.”

The effects these toxic patterns lead to

can be disastrous for the children. Over the course of their lives, a child tends to form attachments to things and people that help them grow as a person. When a child grows up without a healthy bond with their parental figures, their young adult years may see them struggle to maintain relationships and feel lost amidst peers who have already moved ahead in life.

Annapurna shares further, “Given the circumstances I grew up in, I didn’t know how a person should act, or react in social situations or even carry out a basic conversation. So, when I grew up, I found myself surrounded in this ‘stranger-danger’ bubble. That became a huge problem in my life. I practically have no social skills. Not just social skills, I don’t have any skills at all, I don’t even know how to ride a bike. That is how restricted I was.”

These restrictions to a normal childhood ultimately lead to a situation from which there is no easy escape. Indeed, how is a growing adolescent expected to confront and alleviate problems they may have been facing their entire lives? From the many young adults and fully grown adults we reached out to, the consensus remains that the process of healing is an arduous one.

Arefin Akand\*, 29, an undergraduate student, adds to this, “I have internalised the dysfunctional patterns and I think it’s this resentment and bitterness that allows generational dysfunction.”

For many, the attempt to find healing began with the process of moving out. Rafi elaborates on this, “Removing yourself from a toxic environment is actually mandatory for any sort of recovery. The next step is to perhaps work on the psychological effects they may be facing as a result of the situation at home. Here, regular healthy practices can go a long way.”

However, moving away from parents as young adults is a difficult prospect in Bangladesh’s socioeconomic landscape. Many of those still in academic institutions have to adopt lethal lifestyle practices to ensure they have enough money to make ends meet. There is also the prospect of seeking out professional counselling and therapy, something that already has plenty of social stigma against it and can be rather expensive for those already struggling financially.

Sreya Shah\*, 22, a final year student of Law, reflects on her tumultuous relationship with her parents, “I have been living away from them for the past three and a half years. When I had to return back home during COVID, it was so much worse than when I’d left because they viewed me as a separate person rather than their own flesh and blood. So, I moved back out and got more jobs to finance myself. I sort of lost connection with them and was on my own for a while there. Eventually, after the whole COVID situation alleviated, things got a little better for them financially as

well. They reached back out and I let them in because I did not want to be the one to burn bridges.”

What comes next for many is an attempt to reestablish their boundaries and build a new bridge with their family. As young adults slowly veer towards adulthood, many begin to properly internalise the damage coming from these households with the passage of time. In response, many try to communicate and work things out.

Annapurna further adds, “It was difficult being the odd one out in the family, so I gave everything that was in my power to make changes. For example, I like reading. So, I suggested to my parents that since we are so distant and there is nothing common between us, maybe we can read some books as a way to bond. I urged for us to find a solution but to no avail.”

A healthy family may be defined as one where all members are allowed to openly communicate with each other. However, when one side of the communication channel is closed off, a productive conversation cannot take place. When reached out to many of the parents of young adults across Dhaka, we received no comments. This further showcases the struggle many of today’s adolescents face in regards to breaking the cycle of generational dysfunctionality as this can never be a one-sided action. New generation parents, however, have better access to information and can thus be

expected to do better.

Fariha Ferdous\*, 30, a young parent, reflects on her perspective and her hopes for her children, “I would like to ensure there is safe and open communication with my child(ren) to ensure their opinions are taken and counted in family matters. While that may not be the most comprehensive step to healthy upbringing, I think it’s a start. I’d like to also work toward providing them with good education, a healthy family environment, and an avenue for them to partake in activities.”

In regard to the practices in a family, the spread of knowledge and awareness is heavily emphasised. However, our society and its cultural practices has normalised dysfunctional patterns in a way that it has internalised itself into family structures. While spread of information regarding dysfunctional families can help in alleviating the problem, it must also be acknowledged that only through constant effort across generations of healthy parenting can the cycle be dismantled.

*\*Names have been changed for privacy*

*Rudaiba’s semester break is almost over. Send your sympathies at [rudaiba.rhymee@gmail.com](mailto:rudaiba.rhymee@gmail.com)*

*Raian likes asking questions. Ask him a question in return at [abedinraian@gmail.com](mailto:abedinraian@gmail.com)*



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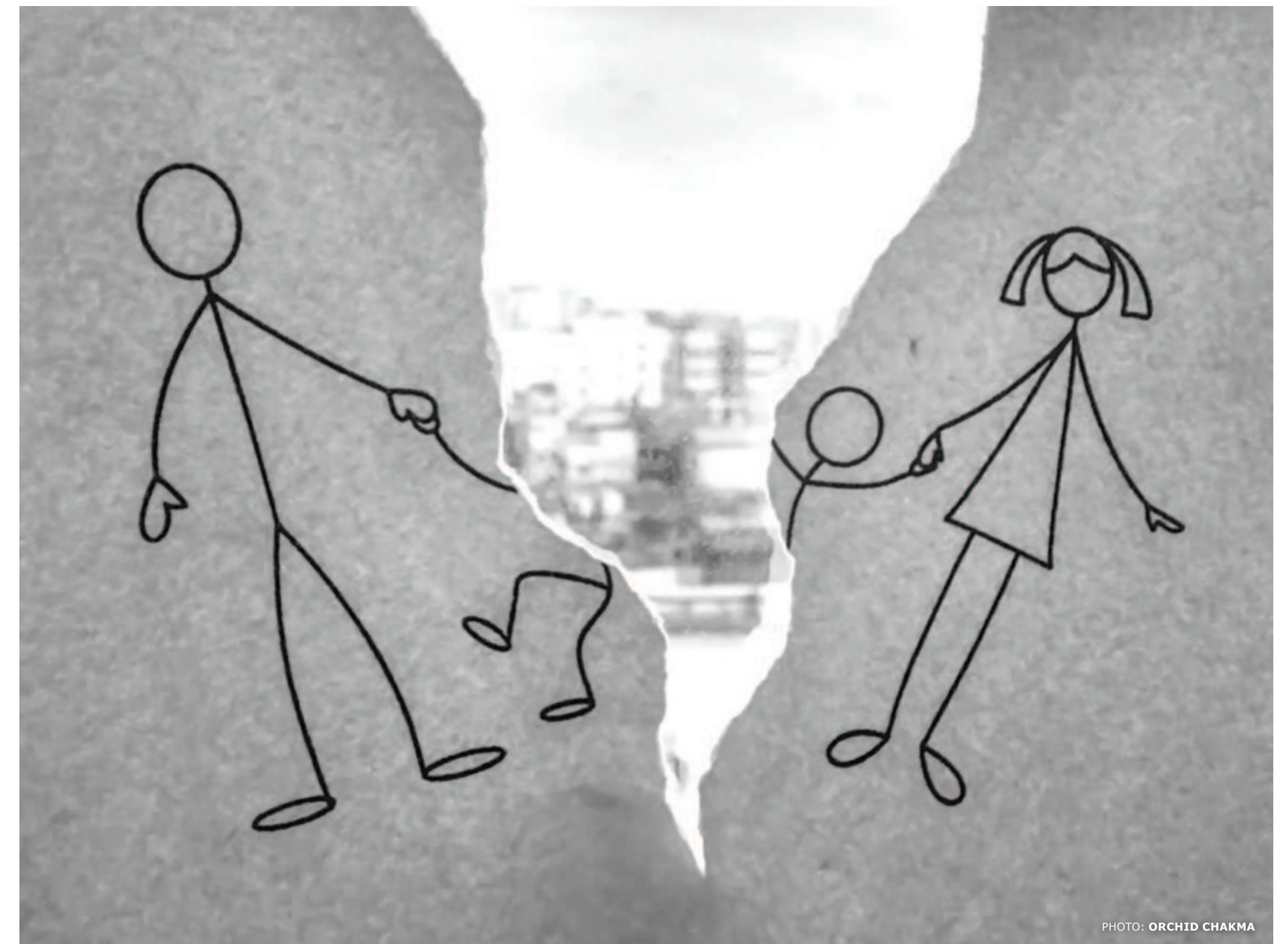


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