



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

# Growing up and navigating life with speech disorders

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The ability to speak is often taken for granted given that communication is an essential part of human existence. Thus, the impact and prevalence of speech disorders often lack visibility in the public eye. According to the Department of Communication Disorders at Dhaka University, Bangladesh doesn't have the exact statistics on people with speech and language impairments, but it is assumed that the number of people with such disorders is increasing every year.

"Early childhood development is the biggest contributor to speech issues. Much of the time, speech disorders are caused by autism or sensory matters. Speech disorders, such as stutters are picked up after a child learns to speak. This is different from speech disorders caused by autism and speech delays caused by sensory problems. Stutters, however are unlike other speech disorders which can be observed from the school going age, whereas other speech disorders and speech delays can only be observed much earlier," says Mohdud Sumon, a senior speech therapist at Therapy Station.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh lacks sufficient facilities that caters to the early development of children with speech disorders caused by autism and sensory issues. Early onset symptoms of such speech disorders must not be overlooked by parents as these children should receive the care they need as early as possible. It is not only the duty of the parents but also the institutions these children attend, to make sure they get the appropriate care they require to have the best possible quality of life.

Speech disorders, such as stutters are seen from a young age. Young people with this kind of unique challenges face difficulties to express themselves clearly. Conditions such as stuttering, articulation disorders, and voice disorders can significantly impact a child's social interactions, academic performance, and self-esteem.

"When I struggle to speak, I feel a sense of shame and helplessness. If I need to mention my destination when getting on a rickshaw or the amount I need to transfer through mobile banking, I might get stuck, and this makes people stare at me. It feels embarrassing," says Nahiyam Siyam, a 26-year-old programme director at LEAD360.

Despite the physiological reasons behind a speech disorder, the way people are perceived by those around them, such as peers and teachers, plays a major role in impacting the severity of the disorder.

"A primary reason behind a person's struggles to overcome a stutter is the pressure they endure. For example, someone with a stutter may fear messing up a presentation or not being able to answer the teacher's question. Children fear being bullied constantly and picked

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on at school. The problem on the surface appears to be the stutter itself, but the constant state of fear that the child lives under makes the stutter significantly worse," adds Sumon.

When asked if he faced bullying in school, Siyam says, "Yes, I did face bullying back in school. There were such instances when the teacher would ask me a question and if I got stuck, they would put me down by saying they had not understood anything I said. There were also those who tried to mock me, but I would say most people were just unaware of how it was a sensitive issue to me even though it might not have been for them."

Content creator Sameer Ahmed, popularly known as SameerScane, has made a name for himself as a public speaker across the country. Sameer has had a speech disorder throughout his life and he shares his experience growing up with a stutter, "When I was younger, people in my family were concerned I couldn't talk. It was never a problem for my family, but as a child going to school, it was a big deal for me. I used to be terrified of giving presentations. I have a vivid memory of one of my first presentations. It was a two to three-minute-long presentation that took about seven or eight minutes, and my teacher made fun of me for taking so long."

Attending speech therapy has helped many around the world. Though therapy is not as widely accessible in our country, the techniques and approaches of speech therapy stand as a solid route of action for those struggling with a speech disorder. When asked about his experience with speech therapy Siyam says, "I attended the National Center for Hearing and Speech for Children (SAHIC) back in 2014 for speech therapy. Speech therapy taught me techniques like finding the right pace to speak with. I learned to pause when speaking and take deep breaths to control my breathing."

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Bangladesh still has a long way to go when it comes to providing adequate facilities for those struggling with speech disorders. However, there are a few centres available, such as Therapy Station in Shanti Nagar and SAHIC in Mohakhali. Although professional help is advised, there are many techniques and methods available on the internet for those who may be unable to access a therapy.

Spreading awareness and giving visibility to speech disorders is necessary for building a more inclusive society. Every child has their own ideas and experiences to share and they must feel included regardless of any struggles they may face with their speech.

*Arshad is a cat dad and a student at Mastermind.*