

■ **CAMPUS LIFE** ■

AFTERMATH OF THE REVOLUTION

The mental health crisis among students



PHOTOS: ORCHID CHAKMA

After a month of intense protests, I returned to class, expecting life to go back to normal. But when someone rang the department doorbell, the sound triggered a wave of panic in me. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I thought that once I resumed my classes, everything would settle. But at that moment, I realised something was wrong.

ADRIN SARWAR

Sabbir Bin Abdul Latif, a final-year Computer Science student at BRAC University, shares his experience as he continues to struggle to adjust to normalcy, "Some of us are still suffering from what happened, but why is nobody talking about it? Many others must be feeling the same, but the mental toll we're facing is being barely discussed."

Participating in or witnessing violent protests can lead to long-term psychological effects such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and heightened levels of anger and stress.

Nayeema Islam Antora, Psychologist and Project Coordinator, the Disabled Child Foundation (DCF) reflects on this matter, "Research indicates that individuals exposed to violence may experience intrusive thoughts, emotional numbness, or difficulty concentrating. These effects can persist over time, affecting academic performance, and overall well-being."

One can recognise the symptoms of PTSD through specific symptoms. "Symptoms of protest-related trauma or anxiety include flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance of reminders related to the event, irritability, difficulty sleeping, or feelings of detachment," Nayeema Islam opines. She also emphasises the importance of early intervention regarding this matter.

Often, some damages from protests are tangible – broken windows, injuries, and vandalised property. But the unseen struggles, the psychological wounds, are rarely spoken about. A space where students can openly talk about their emotions without fear or judgment is essential.

"Universities can create safer spaces by offering mental health support, including counselling services and peer support groups. Institutions should provide regular workshops on trauma management, encouraging open dialogues, and ensuring confidentiality," says Nayeema Islam.

Abu Bakar Siddik Shakib, a student from Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), recounts his experience

after returning to Khulna following the reopening of his institution, "When I came back from Dhaka, no one was talking about the protests. It seemed like nothing had happened, and everyone just moved on with their lives."

Afiya Ibnath Ayshi, a final-year student of Dhaka University (DU) shares, "Even after a month, whenever I pass by Dhanmondi Star Kabab, I get flashbacks of the protest. We had to rush into the building to protect ourselves."

"All my senses are alerted the moment I hear a loud thud on the road. For a minute, I fear gunshots are being fired!" she added.

A meta-analysis of 52 studies by The Australian and New Zealand journal of psychiatry on protests and riots revealed a consistent link between violent protests and mental health issues which indicated a rise in symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, regardless of direct participation.

Sabbir recalls the constant fear he lived with during the protests, "I was terrified of raids. I kept hearing about police raids at my friends' homes. Every time a police car passed by, I would peek through the curtains, fearing they had come for me. It led to countless sleepless nights. I still get nightmares and wake up screaming."

For many students, like Zaki Tajwar, a third-year student at DU, joining protests felt like a moral duty. Standing against perceived injustice often comes with a risk – both physical and psychological. Zaki found himself facing both after actively participating in the movement.

Zaki highlights the emotional isolation that comes with standing up for one's beliefs during trying times, "From the beginning, I was active in the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement. Even though I was a member of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), I supported the quota reform movement. On July 16, I resigned from the BCL to protest the attacks on students. After that, I was accused in a case of vandalism and arson at the Bogura District Awami League office."

While some are struggling at a personal level to cope with fear and anxiety, others are facing a different but equally isolating challenge – feeling abandoned. Despite

standing for what he believed was right, Zaki found himself without the camaraderie he expected from his classmates. "I'm considering dropping out for a year rather than continuing my studies with people who look at me like I've done something wrong when I haven't. I can guess what the situation will be like once classes resume. The essential interactions with classmates will be disrupted," he says.

Nayeema Islam prioritises peer support for those undergoing a state of distress. She says, "Peer support is essential for recovery, as it helps students feel validated and less isolated in their experiences. Effective peer support can include listening without judgment, sharing resources, and encouraging each other to seek professional help when needed."

Support from the faculty can also make a significant difference. "The teachers were understanding," Sabbir says. "They check in on us regularly and recognise how hard it is to concentrate right now. They've been lenient with coursework. The university authority arranged counselling sessions, which we appreciate."

Zaki's experience, however, was different. He says, "The case that has been filed against me has still not been resolved. You can find my name in the detective branch's search list. I am afraid if things go on like this, I may face difficulties in the future with visa proceedings, police verification, and any other legal proceedings. I sought help from my faculty members, but it did not make any difference."

Students like Sabbir and Zaki are still trying to find a sense of normalcy, but the mental wounds from protests will linger unless society acknowledges the invisible scars left behind. We cannot stay stuck in this state forever, but we also cannot ignore the fact that many are still suffering.

Reference:

The Australian and New Zealand journal of psychiatry (2020). *Mental health during and after protests, riots and revolutions: A systematic review.*

Sarwar is a final-year student, surviving on tea and the hope that graduation is real.