

The importance of mental health education in schools

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As much as mental health has been in discussion in recent years, little has been done to address and implement mental health support, especially in our educational institutions. For ages, there has been an unchanging practice in schools to prioritise discipline over understanding, with educators focusing more on managing students' behaviour than addressing the underlying causes of students' distress. It is about time that schools started building healthy relationships with their students and investing in developing healthy minds.

Most of us start school by the age of seven and remain in that same environment until college or university. It is essential, therefore, to create a healthy school environment where open discussions on mental health and wellness are encouraged. In a society where the topic of mental health is so heavily stigmatised, schools need to create a supportive and understanding atmosphere for their students. Mental health, being a vital part of a person's everyday life, is as important as physical health and there is no doubt that it profoundly impacts a student's well-being and academic performance. Thus, mental health education and awareness should be a priority for school authorities.

The path to destigmatising discussions on mental health

School is where we begin learning everything, from our ABCs to navigating the social world. It is natural, therefore, for us to learn to talk about our mental health at school as well. While talking about how one feels comes easily for many, it is equally as difficult for others. Many people fear societal judgement or give in to cultural taboos regarding openly discussing their mental health struggles, and end up refraining from seeking help. To combat this stigma, conversations about mental health issues need to be normalised.

Along with academics and good societal manners, schools should invest in teaching students how to communicate their mental state. Schools can take a step towards it by promoting awareness and education among students to normalise conversations about these topics so that they can express themselves freely and converse easily. If young people are not taught to advocate for their mental health or talk about the issues they are facing, they may continue bottling up their struggles and avoid seeking help until they are actively in crisis. Schools need to take an active part in preparing students enough to prevent that.

Education should be a holistic approach

Education is the cornerstone of a country's development but Bangladesh's education policy has seen limited progress over the years, with the curriculum remaining stagnant towards its emphasis on rote learning. The focus on rote learning needs to take a back seat and a holistic approach has to be adapted to ensure the mental well-being of our students. This involves understanding the broader context of a student's life and considering the emotional and psychological factors that contribute to how they act and perform in school. There is a common misconception that students who struggle with behaviour or academics are simply lazy, slow, or disruptive, ignoring



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

the possibility that they might be dealing with significant emotional and psychological challenges, such as trauma, anxiety, depression, stress etc., that are contributing to their struggles.

Instead of physically or mentally punishing the students, schools should focus on understanding the root causes of their problems and providing appropriate support. This should particularly be the case in high schools where academic pressure often immensely weighs upon students, often adding to the struggles they are already undergoing.

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What can be done to promote mental health and well-being in schools?

Schools in our country fail to realise that the needs of each child are uniquely different, as is their emotional maturity. Authorities should consider these differences to establish a dedicated, professionally equipped counselling department. Teachers having a few months of training in student counselling is a necessity, but it is definitely not enough. Mental health professionals need to be hired by schools to provide well-rounded services. Additionally, schools should hold monthly seminars and workshops on mental health and wellness to promote mental health awareness.

Mental health education needs to be more than motivational posters in hallways and pamphlets on notice

boards; students need to know that their struggles with mental health are normal and that there are adequate resources to help them navigate through them. Counselling can provide students with the proper support they need to be able to understand their emotions, navigate conflicts and doubts, and share their experiences and feelings. It can empower them to assess their abilities, interests, and needs, and to find constructive solutions for personal and social adjustments at both home and school.

Taking small initiatives can go a long way towards helping students. Lessons on neurochemistry coupled with deep, interactive conversations about how our mind works and why we feel what we feel can be integrated into science classes. Language classes could incorporate sections on writing essays about how the students are feeling so that they can learn how to think about and articulate their emotions.

Public schools usually don't have the resources to develop a functioning mental well-being support system for their students. Despite having the means and resources, private schools fail to address the lack of mental health awareness and support in their schools due to their unwillingness. However, schools need to recognise the necessity of mental health services and try to allocate some funding towards them to ensure that all students have access to the support they need.

There exists a pressing need for schools to prioritise mental health education. By providing mental health education, they can help students manage stress as well as teach them to communicate their feelings and show empathy towards others. Having early educational knowledge on mental health can go a long way towards equipping them with the necessary skills to bounce back from adversity and effectively manage present and future challenges, preventing them from falling prey to mental health crises. It also builds a positive relationship with one's mind.

A proactive approach to mental health and wellness builds valuable life skills and emotional intelligence, preparing students for real-life struggles and fostering a much-needed culture of openness about mental health and accessing mental health resources.

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