

■ OFF CAMPUS ■

WHY ARE YOUNG PEOPLE RESORTING TO ONLINE PLATFORMS FOR MENTAL SUPPORT?

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According to a survey by the Achol Foundation, in 2024, at least 310 students from various educational institutions took their own lives. Nearly half of them were school-goers, and the vast majority fell within the 13- to 19-year age group. Yet, many parents fail to recognise the gravity of a child's mental health condition and thus, may hold the misconception that such issues can be resolved without seeking professional help. Due to the prevailing mindset surrounding mental healthcare, professional help remains largely inaccessible to young people, causing them to feel isolated and, at times, even helpless.

Raihan Kabir*, 17, recalls how his attempts to open up about his emotional distress were dismissed as being ungrateful. "Trying to speak to my father is like talking to a brick wall. While he recognises that I am probably not in the right headspace, his solution to the problem is to always turn to a higher power. One of my relatives once told me that I should be thankful for being able to afford the necessities, and as many people aren't as fortunate. They advised me to focus on my studies instead."

He continues, "It's exhausting to have to explain myself over and over again, when no one seems to understand what I go through every day. After that, I stopped trying at all."

The ground for mental health discourse remains shrouded in misconception and stigma. In fact, being diagnosed with a mental disorder is still viewed through a lens of shame or even denial. In Bangladesh, digital platforms as informal avenues of seeking help have risen, especially amongst the younger demographic. This development underscores a profound gap between the access that's required and the kind that currently prevails.

As many young people lack the financial means, knowledge, or familial support necessary to access formal counselling, online platforms often become a substitute for professional help. These forums aim to provide a platform that allows individuals to share their personal experiences with each other, offer reassurance and well-meaning advice, and foster a sense of community.

"I'm not sure how to present the situation to my parents, and I don't think they would understand either. Speaking to strangers online who have endured similar

experiences as I did makes me feel less alone," says Samia Islam*, a high school student at an English medium school in Dhaka.

To better understand how these platforms operate and work on maintaining a safe space for young members, including minors who rely on them for support, we spoke to Mursalin Hasan Chowdhury Alfie, admin of Healthy Minds — a popular mental health support group on Facebook.

She states, "We have a set of rules in place that all members are required to follow. For example, anonymous posts must include age and gender so that members, especially women, can decide whether they feel comfortable engaging. We maintain a rule that prevents men from commenting on posts made by women under the age of 21, considering the social context and risks women face online. We also have membership questions to keep out people who harbour contempt toward different communities. All requests are screened by our moderators to filter out prejudiced views. Members must add trigger warnings to sensitive posts, and we clearly state that the group is not a crisis helpline or a substitute for professional mental health care."

Aside from engaging with online communities, another form of mental health support has recently gained traction: the use of chatbots. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots to imitate therapy sessions as an alternative to seeing a licensed therapist is becoming a common practice.

Raya Hossain*, 14, shares her experience, "There is an AI assistant designed for the sole purpose of serving as your therapist. I actually discovered its existence while scrolling through Instagram, and I find it to be quite useful. It can pick up on key points, ask follow-up questions, and sometimes even offer great advice. But a lot of the time, it also just repeats whatever I say or gives extremely generic responses like any other AI assistant. I'm aware that it's not a real person, but it makes me feel like someone is listening from a non-judgemental point of view."

Speaking to our respondents, many of them alleged that using AI-powered tools as a substitute for therapy is the most

accessible solution. To evaluate this claim, we reached out to two different experts in the field to hear their perspective.

Shermin Abedin, Senior Psychologist at Mindspace, stresses that AI should never be treated as a substitute for professional therapy. "In a therapeutic session, the way a counsellor listens, expresses empathy, maintains eye contact, uses tone, body language, and selects appropriate therapeutic tools, all of these play a critical role in healing. AI simply cannot replicate that human connection," she suggests.

"Instead, I would recommend identifying one or two trustworthy people, friends, family members, or mentors with whom they can share their feelings. These people should be reliable and respectful of confidentiality. In addition, teenagers can practice self-mapping exercises, identify their strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, and work on developing their emotional and coping skills."

Sumaya Afrin Misti, a senior school Counsellor at the Aga Khan Academy, opines, "To make therapy more accessible to children, mental health support should not be viewed as an optional add-on but rather as an essential component embedded within the school curriculum. Schools that prioritise pastoral care and socio-emotional counselling play a vital role in normalising conversations around mental health and reducing stigma."

She adds, "Early identification and intervention for conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, and mood disorders are critical, and schools serve as the first point of observation and referral to clinical psychologists or psychiatrists. This not only facilitates timely and appropriate treatment but also fosters collaboration among educators, mental health professionals, and parents, ultimately enhancing the students' social and academic development."

Unfortunately, the notion that mental healthcare is a privilege is not inaccurate. This compels the youth to turn to alternative means. While the substitutes they turn to may offer temporary assistance, without the surveillance of trained professionals, they carry the risk of misinformation and unverified advice.

So, for individuals who are unable to obtain professional care, what other options remain?

Mehrin Simran, the Founder of Mindspace, an organisation working towards ensuring awareness regarding mental health, mentions emergency hotline services that work towards providing immediate emotional relief and guiding people toward the professional care they require. "Our organisation also extends this kind of support through Vent, our psychological hotline service, which offers confidential help from trained listeners with a background in psychology.

Volunteers of our immediate crisis intervention service respond through texting and call services, sharing helpful resources, and supporting individuals in taking the next step toward healing," she adds.

**Names have been changed upon request*

Reference:

The Daily Star (January 19, 2025). *65pc of suicide victims among students are teens: survey*

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

