

Menstrual pain management and the lack of targeted therapy in Bangladesh



ILLUSTRATION: AZRA HUMAYRA

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Due to the wide range of experiences among menstruating individuals, the term "menstruation", which generally refers to the monthly release of blood through the vagina, remains mysterious. Blood discharge is one of its components, but there are many more that we rarely discuss. Among the many is the management of menstrual pain.

It's not uncommon to see people be unaware of menstrual pain simply because they do not experience it, and that leads to overgeneralisation. It could even affect the judgement of those who shape the minds of young people.

"I got my period quite early, and I was scared to ask many questions. I remember crying to my mother as to why this was happening to me; she laughed and said it would be alright. I never experienced excruciating pain, and when my Science teacher in class nine said how menstrual pain is psychological, I agreed with her, not knowing any better," said Fatema Tuz Zohra, a final-year student at Chittagong University.

According to a paper published by the *Centre for Economic Studies and Ifo Institute (CESifo)*, titled "Social Norms and Misinformation: Experimental Evidence on Learning about Menstrual Health Management in Rural Bangladesh", the majority of menstruating people report decreased physical and mental well-being, particularly stress and shame, during menstruation. Additionally, there are significant knowledge gaps regarding the proper use of hygienic materials for menstrual health management, and empirical and normative expectations align with the reported adverse health behaviours. The shame

surrounding menstruation is one of the key reasons for the dearth of discussions about menstruation and, more specifically, menstrual pain.

Zohra further added, "It was not until my early 20s that I learned about endometriosis and other issues that lead to intense menstrual pain. With the shame surrounding menstruation, I thought it'd be better if I didn't draw much attention to it. I never thought that simply not knowing about these issues was causing me to invalidate other people's experiences."

Because of the lack of awareness, targeted therapy is often rare. Menstruating people often think their symptoms are not alarming and that everyone experiences the same symptoms, which is not true. Even if we look at the statistics by the World Health Organisation (WHO), endometriosis affects roughly 10 percent (approximately 190 million) of reproductive-age people globally.

Merely prescribing medication to alleviate menstrual pain is insufficient for addressing all issues; healthcare professionals must provide adequate explanations to enable patients to fully understand their current situation and make educated decisions. Alo Akter, who has been suffering from severe menstrual pain due to endometriosis for more than two years, states, "I used to feel intense pain during my periods, but the worst menstrual pain I endured was when I couldn't even sit at home and do online classes. Then, I went to the doctor, and the ultrasound showed a cyst on my ovary. The doctor told me that I should stop my period by taking pills and told me to get married in a few months, but when I asked if my problem would go away afterward, he could

not give me the answer."

There were a few complaints from one of the interviewees who wished to remain anonymous. She suffers from vaginismus, which causes vaginal muscles to involuntarily or persistently contract. She says, "I didn't even know what vaginismus was. I contacted my gynaecologist because I wanted to use tampons but couldn't because of the pain. She prescribed me pills. What will that do? Pills won't help the pain."

Upon talking with a few others, a pattern was noticed: whenever a patient complained regarding pain, the doctors often prescribed birth-control pills.

Pills are effective when it comes to regulating your cycles and managing pain to some extent, but they are not for all conditions.

of a one-size-fits-all approach, particularly the indiscriminate prescribing of birth control pills, fails to address the diverse and individual experiences of those who menstruate. This approach often overlooks the unique needs of individuals suffering from conditions such as endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), vaginismus, etc., leading to inadequate treatment and continued suffering.

The deep-rooted shame and stigma surrounding menstruation contribute significantly to the lack of open discussions and awareness, further perpetuating the issue. To address the situation, parents and educators must create a more informed and encouraging atmosphere for young people, and

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Besides, pills are not for everyone. According to another paper titled "Adverse Effect of Combined Oral Contraceptive Pills" published in the *Asian Journal of Pharmaceutical and Clinical Research*, because of using pills, people of reproductive age experience side effects such as spotting, weight gain or weight loss, nausea, breast tenderness, severe headache, depression, darkening skin, and vaginal infection. The adverse effects might make daily tasks a nuisance.

A lack of understanding and knowledge among parents lead to a reluctance to take pain medication and targeted therapy. Dr Shamima Akter, gynaecology and obstetrics consultant at Prabin Hospital (BAAIGM), says, "There's a lack of targeted therapy for menstrual pain because parents seldom discuss the manifold aspects of menstrual cycles and patterns. I have patients who complain of severe pain during their menstruation but never take pain medication because their parents deem medications to be redundant or that their children might become heavily reliant on them. Some guardians take active measures when they realise their children are having severe pain during menstruation, but most parents usually lack knowledge and awareness, hence the lack of targeted therapy."

The management of menstrual pain in Bangladesh is hindered by a lack of targeted therapy and knowledge. The prevalent use

of healthcare experts must provide individualised care and thorough explanations. For Bangladesh's menstrual population to maintain their physical and emotional health, these gaps must be filled.

As though pain were merely a personal flaw, every cramp, spasm, and blood heaviness are felt in private, stitched into women's existence. Families hush it, teachers dismiss it, and doctors often reduce it into a prescription. But pain that is unnamed grows heavier; it presses into the mind until it feels like shame. To speak of it openly is still seen as transgressive, to demand answers is to risk being told it is all in your head. Yet, if half the population must bleed in order to exist, why must their suffering remain unacknowledged? Why must they be taught to live as though their pain were not real?

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A guide to giving good gifts

TINATH ZAEBA

As satisfying as it is to get a good gift, it can be just as satisfying to give a great one. For many, gifting is a love language. It is a way to show affection, celebrate moments, and express our love beyond words.

That being said, deciding what to gift someone can feel challenging at times. However, if you remember a few things, the whole process becomes a lot easier.

Personalise the gift

There are many ways to make a gift feel personal. For instance, instead of a typical keychain, try a resin one made with their favourite flowers shaped into their initials. Or, if you're getting them something like a plushie, tuck in a letter to explain why you picked it. You could even give the plushie a name and a backstory. Another personalisation option is engraving something, like a wallet or necklace, with the recipient's initials or a meaningful word.

Personal touches work well when you want to impress someone you don't know very well, or someone who already owns a lot of things.

Pay attention to what they like

It's tempting to go with the first idea that crosses your mind, like a jersey for a football fan. But thoughtful gifting is about the person, not just the category.

If someone's always outdoors, maybe they'd like a water bottle that keeps drinks cold or a cool smartwatch. If they wear bold colours, get something equally vibrant and fun.

One of the best gifts I received was a curl cream set, because a friend noticed my hair was naturally curly, even though I never mentioned it. That observation meant a lot, so paying attention is key here.



Give something they wouldn't buy for themselves

Great gifts are often small luxuries people don't afford themselves, like a good scented candle, sleep mask, or spa voucher. It doesn't need to be pricey; just something that feels like a treat. This makes the gift memorable as everyone likes a little treat.

You can also go for functionality, like a gift set with shower products and a bathrobe, or a snack box themed around a favourite colour or type of food.

Unwrapping is part of the gift

Presentation adds a lot to a gift. You don't need expert wrapping skills, but showing care with nice wrapping paper, a ribbon, or a box makes the moment feel special.

A well-wrapped gift builds curiosity. I also try to include a detailed letter inside explaining my reason for the gift and why I got it for them. Gift bags are also a great option if you're like me and don't know how to wrap properly.

Don't overthink the price

Good gifts don't have to be expensive. As corny as it sounds, it really is the thought that matters. A handmade bracelet, a book they would enjoy, or a card in their favourite colour can all be meaningful. You could make jewellery using resin or polymer clay from stationery stores to make a cute decor for their space. A handmade friendship bead bracelet never gets old.

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Are we treating the strays right?

ADRIAN SARWAR

We should not be depending only on a small group of people to take care of all strays. It should be a community effort.



There was a time, not too long ago, when stray animals weren't seen as a nuisance. They were silent companions who were considered a part of the community. They may not have worn collars or eaten from food dispensers, but they belonged everywhere and with everyone.

Strays used to be able to roam around freely, without having to think about food or a place to sleep, because residents left their windows ajar, kept leftover food aside, and made space in the corner of their verandas. Whenever it was time for a meal, cats and dogs would show up at these homes. These animals weren't "owned," but they were cherished. Every neighbourhood had a familiar face. The community members would collectively care for them, like a neighborhood ritual. However, times have changed. Communities no longer welcome strays. Rather, they take stringent measures to keep them away.

What, then, should we make of the stories about how neighbours used to safeguard and care for the animals?

I heard from my mother that, on a stormy night, my grandfather rescued a family of cats. After a lot of searching, amid the storm, he managed to find the mother and her litter of kittens. He brought all of them back home. In many ways, it feels as though the sentiments that my grandfather fostered were

passed down to him through the spirit of community. But why exactly has this sense of responsibility withered away?

Perhaps, architecture played a role. Before, homes were built close to the ground. Almost every house had open courtyards and shaded spaces that naturally offered shelter, allowing easy access for cats and dogs.

However, as cities grew vertically, high rises replaced smaller buildings. With people retreating into their own individual spaces, the emotional distance within the community

widened as well. Tall buildings and gated communities left no room for strays to wander around or rest for a while. By placing individuality at the heart of our urban life, we have paid the price of a weakening community, one that drastically changed people's mindset towards stray animals. Not only do they think of these animals as pests, but they are also ready to go to any extent to get rid of them.

Earlier this year, reports of brutal killing of a dog named Keeper, a known and loved stray in Dhaka's Elephant Road area. Another shocking incident unfolded last year in Japan Garden City in Mohammadpur, with multiple dogs and cats dying after consuming poisoned food that was left out in the open.

Amidst the grief and anger that these incidents fuel, there are glimpses of hope. Small activist groups are stepping up – rescuing injured animals, organising adoption drives, and educating the public

about neutering and co-existence. More people are also speaking up, demanding laws that protect street animals and punish cruelty.

What we must reckon with, though, is that we have regressed from where we once were. We should not be depending only on a small group of people to take care of all strays. It should be a community effort. We must acknowledge that strays were and remain a part of the neighbourhood.

As the short story "Birbal" by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay notes, when both humans and animals feel hunger and thirst, only humans are allowed to eat freely, while animals are beaten for doing the same.

"Whatever you eat, we have a share in that too, simply because we are a part of this society too."

Reviving empathy isn't just about changing minds; it's about rebuilding spaces, values, and rhythms that allow us to live with animals, not just around them.

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1. The Daily Star (March 9, 2025). *Community shocked after beloved dog Keeper killed*.
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