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Research Article

The Hidden Struggles of Bangladeshi High School Students: Mental Health Crisis

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Abstract. This study aimed to assess the level of awareness and understanding of mental health among a purposefully selected sample of Bangladeshi high school students. We hypothesize that the population of Bangladeshi high school students has insufficient knowledge and comprehension about mental health, and this is a major reason behind the high burden of mental health problems in this group. In addition, parents are not aware of this topic and pay less attention to their children's mental health, and this shortage, coupled with the stigma, may further exacerbate the situation and less help-seeking behavior amongst students. The data was gathered through an online survey. Findings indicated a demand for greater attention to mental health education in high schools, to overcome cultural barriers and stereotypes to mental health concerns, and to emphasize parent education in mental health. Moreover, the research showed that a significant number of parents are not informed regarding mental health issues, and that could make the parents more vulnerable to their children's mental well-being. This work offers useful information regarding the present level of mental health awareness among Bangladeshi high school students and serves as an indication that research in this area will continue to be needed. Results hold promise for the design of culturally appropriate mental

health interventions, designed to help increase mental health and reduce stigma within this community.

Keywords: Mental Well-being in Bangladesh, Mental Health in Bangladesh, High School Student Mental Health.

INTRODUCTION

The well-being of young individuals is essential for their growth and development, and mental health plays a crucial role in this (1). Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, mental health awareness among high school students remains low, leaving many students struggling with mental health challenges without proper support or understanding. A 2018 study among Bangladeshi adolescents in urban and semi-urban schools found that 36.6% suffered from depressive symptoms (girls: 42.9%, boys: 25.7%) (2). Another study found that 28.5%, 33.3% and 46.92% of home-quarantined Bangladeshi students had stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms, respectively (3).

With only 4 hospital beds per 10,000 people, Bangladesh faces an immense burden of illness arising from both communicable and non-communicable diseases, including mental disorders (4,5). Mental healthcare in Bangladesh is enormously inadequate owing to a lack of public mental health facilities, scarcity of skilled mental health professionals, insufficient financial resource distribution and societal stigma. These shortcomings are sustained by the absence of effective stewardship to execute adequate mental health policies (5).

Adolescent mental health problems have emerged as a significant public health problem and mental discomfort, anxiety and disorders are already increasing worldwide during this pandemic (6). During the outbreak, the prevalence of mental problems has increased among adolescents. Several studies showed that these adolescents are encountering a delayed condition of actual detachment from their companions, educators, more distant family, and community connections (7). The chances of adversely affected youth or adolescents are higher since the Pandemic introduced novel difficulties and stressors (8). Globally, nearly 15% of young people ages 10-19 experience a mental health disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group (9).

We hypothesize that the majority of Bangladeshi high school students lack adequate awareness and understanding of mental health, which contributes to a significant prevalence of mental health challenges among this demographic. Furthermore, we predict that there is a deficiency in mental health education and support systems within Bangladeshi high schools and communities, leading to a lack of resources for students facing mental health issues. Additionally, we anticipate that parents' limited knowledge and attention to their children's mental well-being may compound these challenges, resulting in increased stigma and inadequate help-seeking behaviors among students. This research pointed out some valuable insights on this topic, such as when asked whether responders received any education or training on mental health or not, only 5.4% responded affirmatively. 44.6% of

responders agreed to have experienced potential symptoms of mental illness and surprisingly, 20.7% reported experiencing it on a weekly basis. By analyzing the data collected, this research aims to provide valuable insights that will help inform future initiatives aimed at improving mental health support for high school students in Bangladesh.

RESEARCH METHODS

The methods for this study involved conducting an online survey among Bangladeshi high school students. The survey was designed to gather information about the participants' level of awareness and understanding of mental health. The survey questions covered topics such as the participants' knowledge of mental health, the availability of resources to them, their attitudes toward seeking help for mental health issues, and their perceptions of mental health in Bangladeshi society, and were administered through a secure online platform (Google Forms).

The data was collected between January 26 and February 28, 2022. The forms were distributed randomly in different schools by the help of teachers. Prior to the survey, the participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study and gave voluntary consent to participate.

A total of 92 high school students from grades 8-12 participated in this study. The majority of respondents identified as male, comprising 52.2% of the sample, while females made up 44.6%. Only a small fraction, 3.3%, chose not to disclose their gender. Thus, the gender distribution in this study was fairly balanced, with slightly more male participants than females.

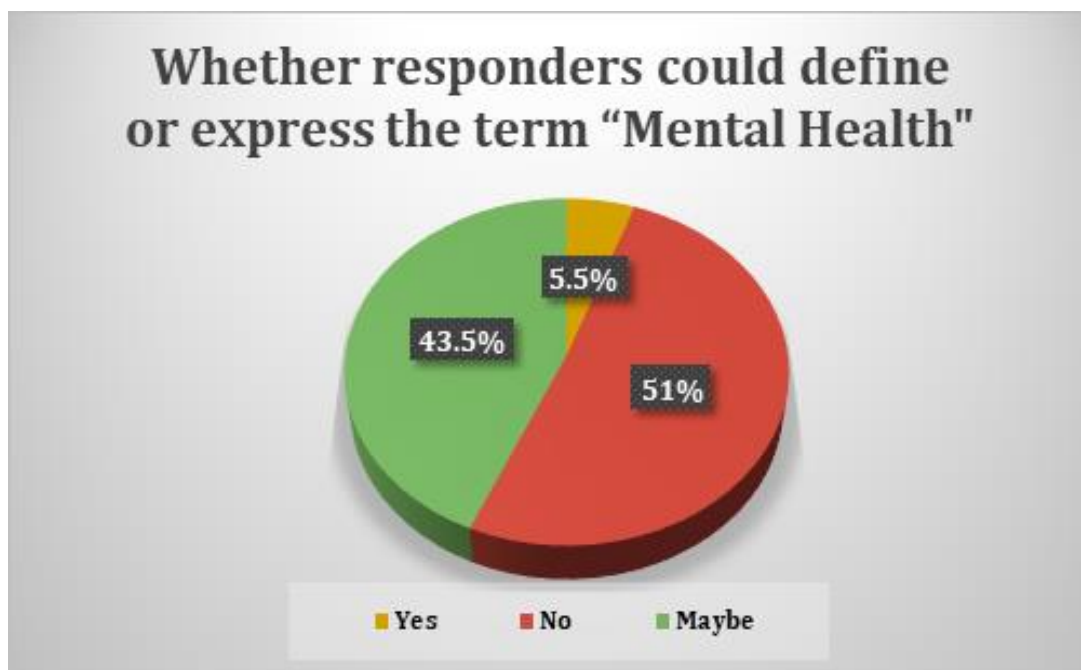
The inclusion criteria for participants in this study were that they were currently enrolled in any high schools in Bangladesh and were able to provide informed consent to participate in the study. Any participants who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study.

Ethical considerations were taken into account during the study. To ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity, participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and that their data would only be used for research purposes. The survey was also voluntary and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. An online consent form was required for participating in this study. Other ethical issues (eg, the purpose of the study, participants' right to decline to participate or withdraw from participation, data confidentiality, etc.) were followed as per the Helsinki Declaration of 2013 as suggested by the World Medical Association (18).

RESULTS

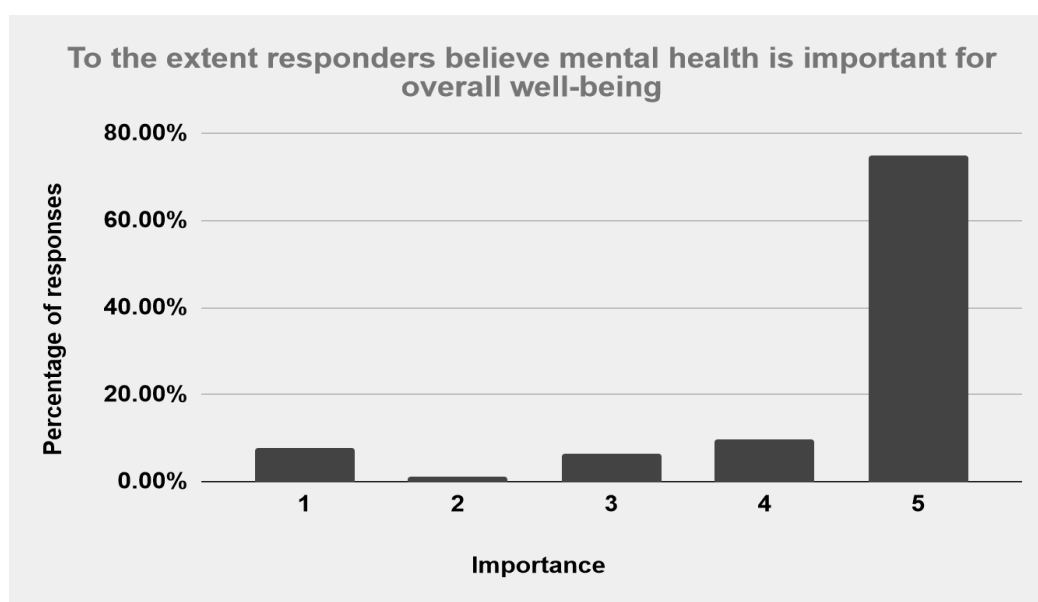
When asked if they could define or express the term "Mental Health", only 5.5%(n=5) of the participants stated they could express it correctly, with 51%(n=47) of respondents indicating that they couldn't express the term. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Whether responders could define or express the term “Mental Health”. Red, green, and yellow denote the number of responders who responded negatively, affirmatively, and who were unsure, respectively.



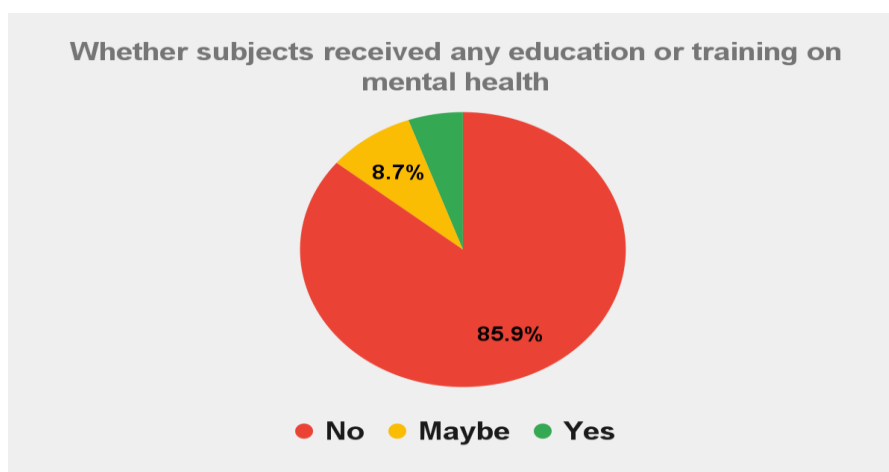
75%(n=69) of the responders rated mental health to be very important for overall well-being, rating 5 out of 5 and only 7.6%(n=7) rated it as not important, rating 1 out of 5. (Figure 2)

Figure 2. To the extent that responders believe mental health is important for overall well-being. 1 meaning lowest importance, 5 meaning highest importance.



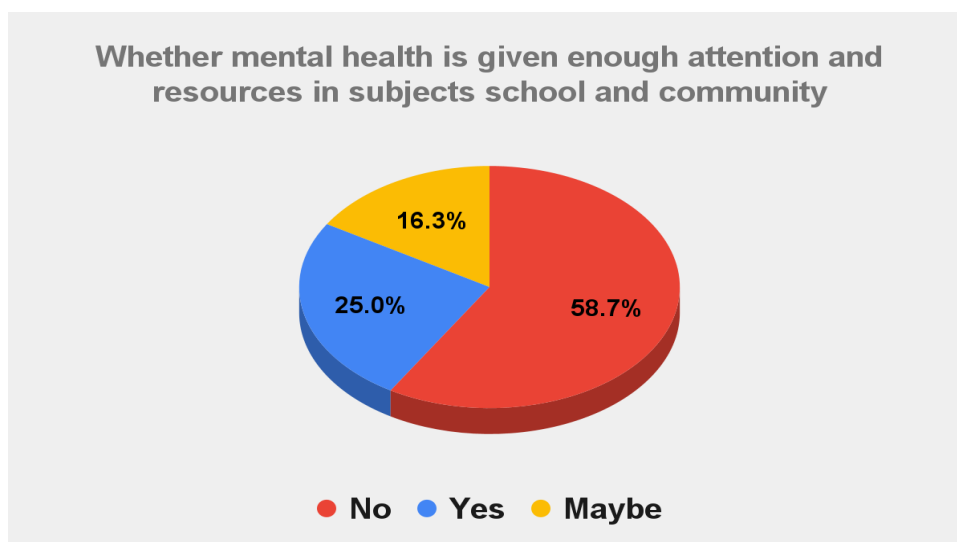
Among the participants, the majority (85.9%, n=79) reported that they had not received any education or training on mental health. This indicates that there is a significant lack of education and training on mental health among the participants. (Figure 3)

Figure 3. Whether subjects received any education or training on mental health. Red, blue, and yellow denote the number of responders who responded negatively, affirmatively, and who were unsure, respectively.



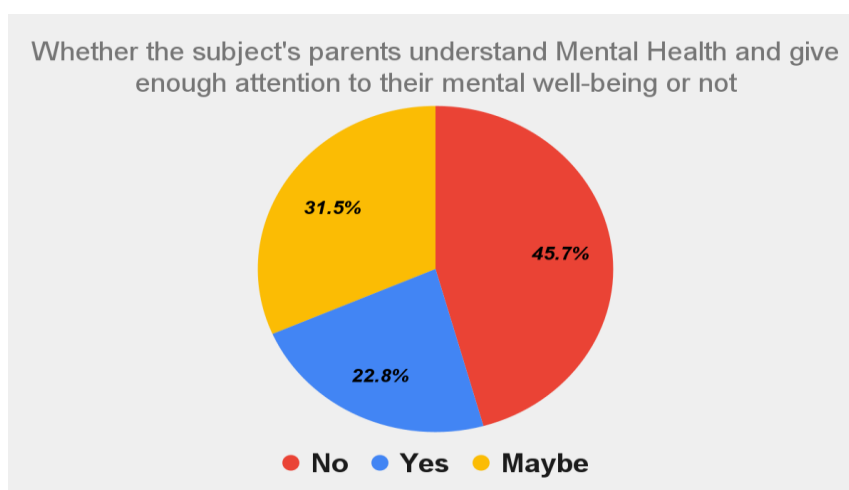
More than half of the participants (58.7%, n=54) believed that mental health is not given enough attention and resources in their schools and community. This suggests that there is a lack of support for mental health in these environments. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Whether mental health is given enough attention and resources in the school and community. Red, blue, and yellow denote the number of responders who responded negatively, affirmatively, and who were unsure, respectively.



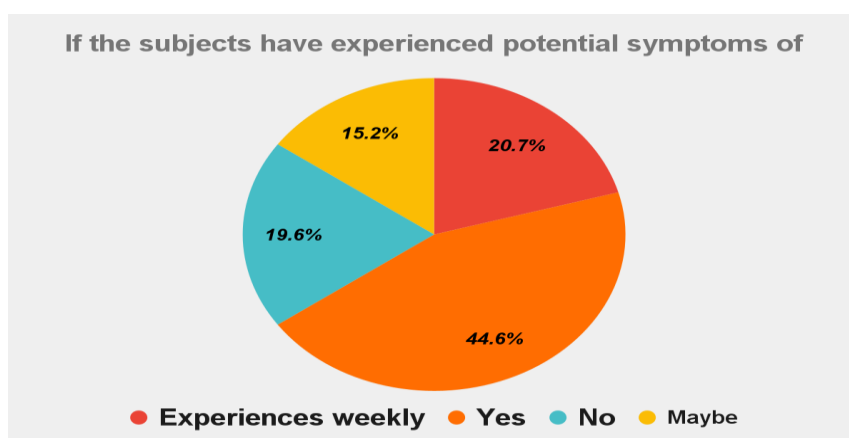
Only 22.8%(n=21) reported affirmatively that their parents understood and paid attention to their mental health, while 45.7%(n=42) responded negatively. Meanwhile, a significant number of them (31.5%, n=29) were unsure. (Figure 5)

Figure 5. Whether the subject's parents understand Mental Health and give enough attention to their mental well-being or not. Red, blue, and yellow denote the number of responders who responded negatively, affirmatively, and who were unsure, respectively.



A significant number of the responders (44.6%, n=41) of the participants reported experiencing potential symptoms of mental illnesses like an 'attack' of fear, anxiety, or panic. Additionally, 20.7%(n=19) of the participants reported experiencing these symptoms on a weekly basis. (Figure 6)

Figure 6. If the subjects have experienced potential symptoms of Mental illnesses. Orange, blue, yellow, and Red denote the number of responders who responded affirmatively, negatively, who were unsure, and responders who responded experiencing weekly, respectively.

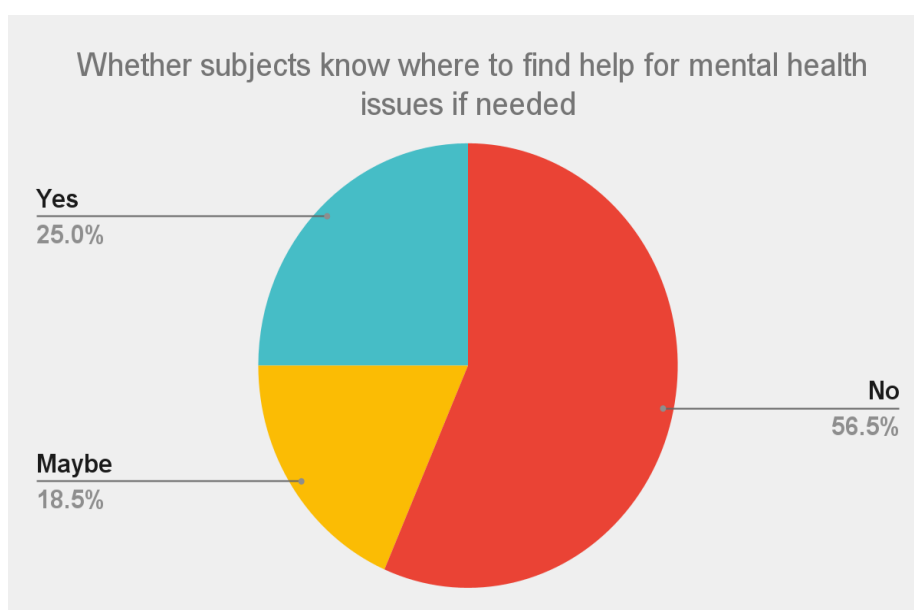


More than half (60.9%, $n=56$) of participants believed mental health problems were a personal weakness or a result of a lack of willpower, while 17.4% ($n=16$) were unsure. (Figure 7) Only one-fourth of participants (25%, $n=23$) responded that they knew where to find help for mental health, while 18.5% ($n=17$) were unsure. (Figure 8)

Figure 7. Whether subjects believe mental health problems are a personal weakness or a result of a lack of willpower. Red, blue, and yellow denote the number of responders who responded affirmatively, negatively, and who were unsure, respectively.



Figure 8. Whether subjects know where to find help for mental health issues, if needed. Red, blue, and yellow denote the number of responders who didn't know, who did know, and who were unsure, respectively.



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal several important insights into the state of mental health awareness and resources among high school students in the surveyed population. The majority of respondents identified as male, with a slightly higher representation of males than females. While the majority of participants recognize the importance of mental health for overall well-being, only half of them reported being very familiar with the concept. Additionally, when asked to define mental health, more than half of the respondents could not express the term correctly. This suggests that there is a need for more education and awareness-raising efforts about mental health, which goes in line with previous studies (10).

It is concerning to note that the majority of participants reported experiencing a week or longer of lower-than-usual interest in activities, which may be indicative of a potential mental health issue, Anhedonia (11). Similarly, a significant proportion of participants (44.6%, n=41) reported experiencing potential symptoms of mental illnesses like an 'attack' of fear, anxiety, or panic (12) while 20.7%(n=19) of the participants reported experiencing these symptoms on a weekly basis. These findings indicate that a significant proportion of the population may be struggling with mental health issues.

Only a small percentage reported having received education or training on mental health, and only 25%(n=23) of the responders know where to find help for mental health issues if needed, which again implies a notable deficiency in education and support pertaining to this domain.

Additionally, the finding that more than half of the participants(58.7%, n=54) believed that mental health is not given enough attention and resources in their school and community is concerning. This indicates that there is a potential gap in the support and resources available to individuals who may be struggling with mental health issues. Lack of attention and resources may lead to inadequate mental health support in schools and communities (13).

The finding that most parents don't understand or give enough attention to their children's mental health is concerning, as parents play a significant role in shaping their children's understanding and attitudes towards mental health (14). When parents are not equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to address mental health issues, this may lead to negative outcomes, such as increased stigma or a failure to seek timely and appropriate help when needed (15). Therefore, there is a need for increased awareness and education about mental health issues within families, particularly among parents. Moreover, the finding that 31.5%(n=29) of the respondents were unsure whether their parents understood mental health and gave enough attention to their mental well-being is also noteworthy. It suggests that there may be a lack of communication or discussion on this topic within families.

The majority of the participants believed mental health problems were a personal weakness which again represents a lack of awareness. This finding is also concerning as this perception can lead to stigma and discrimination towards individuals with mental health issues (16), which can further exacerbate their symptoms and discourage them from seeking help. This highlights the need for

education and awareness campaigns to help combat the negative attitudes toward mental health. It is important to emphasize that mental health problems are not a personal weakness⁽¹⁷⁾ and it can affect anyone regardless of their characteristics or abilities.

The results of the study indicate that there is a lack of education and awareness about mental health among the participants, as a majority reported not receiving any education or training on mental health, and many could not express their understanding of the term. More than half of the participants believed that mental health is not given enough attention and resources in their school and community, and only a minority knew where to find help for mental health issues if needed. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the participants reported experiencing potential symptoms of mental illness, while a majority believed that mental health problems are a personal weakness. These findings suggest a need for more education, awareness, and support for mental health, as well as destigmatization of mental health issues, in the community and educational settings.

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