Reducing the Stigma of Mental Illness Among Medical Students

Victoria Laun OMS III, Matthew Jaffa OMS III, Catherine Babbitt-Cook OMS III, Burton Mark, D.O., Jane Dumba, Ph.D., Marcus Bell, Ph.D., Denai Appelt, Ph.D.
Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Abstract

Abstract

Introduction

Department of medical schools across the nation are more than ever before aware of mental illnesses among medical students. Approximately 39% of medical students experience some form of mental illness during medical school, and 22% report ever experiencing suicide ideation during medical school. It is estimated that 3%-10% of the general population in the same age group in the United States has a mental illness disorder. The topic of mental illness is often a difficult topic to discuss due to the feelings of shame and stigmatization associated with mental illness. There is consequently a need to understand mental health issues as a component of medical school.

This study was modeled after the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine’s Mental Illness Among Us event held annually by second year medical students. The event was adapted for the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine. During the program, data from the online survey were shared, student organizers distributed informational pamphlets of mental health resources and Dr. Burton Mark who sat in on our event and listened graciously to our stories. We would also like to thank Dr. Tina Woodruff who created and operationalized our online survey. We would also like to thank Dr. Dan Lowenstein from the University of California San Francisco for planting the seed for this study. We would like to thank Dr. Ahmed Alkhateeb for his continued support and encouragement. We would like to thank all the students who actively participated in our survey.

Discussion: Incorporating an emotional health symposium into medical school's training may increase understanding and acceptance of those who may have mental illness and reduce stigma associated with mental illness, and coping mechanisms used during medical school.

Results

Materials & Methods

The surveys were provided by the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine and adapted for this event. The survey concluded with the option for students to share their personal experience with mental health issues. The survey included questions regarding past and present diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, feelings towards allowing health care providers to de-stress, acquire emotional support, or discuss in an encouraging environment various coping mechanisms used during medical school, coping mechanisms utilized for stress, and use of mental health resources. The surveys provided an opportunity for second year medical students to complete a second survey online, which included questions about stress during medical school and coping mechanisms used that were working for individuals to cope with stress. The surveys were completed by 96 medical students (43% of the class) who indicated they were currently experiencing depression, anxiety or stress. The surveys were completed by 54 medical students (23% of the class) who indicated they were currently experiencing depression, anxiety or stress. Further data analysis is warranted to investigate the relationship between the change of stigma and levels of support felt in medical school, previous diagnosis and treatment of mental illness, and coping mechanisms used during medical school.

In the future, we would like to conduct a follow-up survey to assess the change in stigma and support felt in medical school, and coping mechanisms used during medical school.

Abstract

The American Osteopathic Association House of Delegates Resolution 209 recommends, “increased awareness of depression among U.S. medical students.” This is in the backdrop of research describing the rise in depression among U.S. medical students. As medical student stress continues to rise, it is more important than ever to understand the experiences of medical students. The objective of this study was to examine the mental health issues and coping mechanisms utilized during medical school, coping mechanisms utilized for stress, and the role that personal and available support in medical school. The survey included a vignette describing a mentally ill woman which the students were able to discuss in an encouraging environment.

The majority of medical students who responded to the survey indicated that they were currently experiencing depression, anxiety or stress. Of the respondents, 54 students (23% of the class) indicated they were currently experiencing depression, anxiety or stress. Of the respondents, 54 students (23% of the class) indicated they were currently experiencing depression, anxiety or stress.

Conclusion: Incorporating an emotional health symposium into medical students’ training may increase understanding and acceptance of those who may have mental illness and reduce stigma associated with mental illness.