



An Evaluation of Mental Health in McMaster Physician Assistant Students Completing Didactic Training



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Introduction

- Previous studies have shown that medical students and American PA students have high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.¹⁻⁸
- Risk factors for mental health-related concerns have been identified.
- To date, no research has been conducted in the Canadian physician assistant student population.
- Determining how Canadian PA students manage stress and identifying their risk factors for mental health-related concerns can help inform and improve academic supports.

Objectives

1. Identify significant sources of stress among McMaster physician assistant students during the didactic year.
2. Identify techniques/practices PA students employed to relieve stress throughout the didactic year.
3. Explore changes that can be made by the McMaster Physician Assistant Education Program to improve student mental health support in the future.

Methods

- An online, anonymous survey was developed and piloted on 4 University of Toronto physician assistant students.
- The survey was then reviewed and distributed to all 24 students in the McMaster Physician Assistant Class of 2020.
- This survey identified risk factors correlated with increased mental health issues, determined stress management techniques utilized; and investigated programmatic changes that could inform and improve student mental health supports.
- The collected data was then analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic coding.

Results

Population Demographics

- The majority of the respondents were female, at 87.5%.
- The age groups of the study population included 62.5% aged 20-24 and 37.5% aged 25-29.
- A greater proportion of the students entered the physician assistant program with a bachelor's degree (68.75%) while 31.25% earned a Master's degree prior to entering the program.

Discussion

- McMaster PA students are primarily female, and also face significant stressors such as intense program demands, financial burden, and living away from home (Figure 1). In previous research, all of these factors have been associated with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students in healthcare-focused programs.¹⁻⁸
- Due to the stated risk factors and sources of stress, physician assistant students in a Canadian program also appear to be placed at increased risk for mental health-related concerns.
- Spending time with friends and family, exercise, and watching television were the most effective and commonly used techniques for managing stress among McMaster physician assistant students in their didactic training (Figure 2). Classmates, friends, and family members were the most common and effective support networks that students had in place (Figure 3).
- Initiatives proposed by students to improve mental health support and awareness were organized class activities to relieve stress during busy academic periods, designated days off without case work throughout the year, and a presentation at the beginning of the program to discuss mental health and raise awareness surrounding this issue.
- Limitations to the study included a small sample size of 24 students with 16 responding to the distributed survey, and recall bias due to the fact that the survey was distributed at the end of didactic training and not throughout.

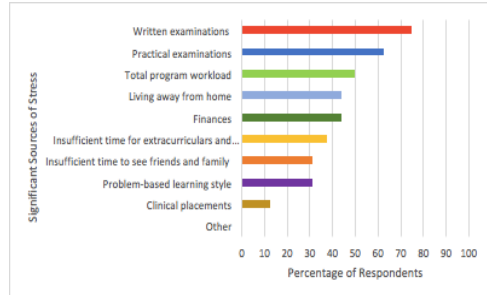


Figure 1. Significant sources of stress identified by PAEP learners.

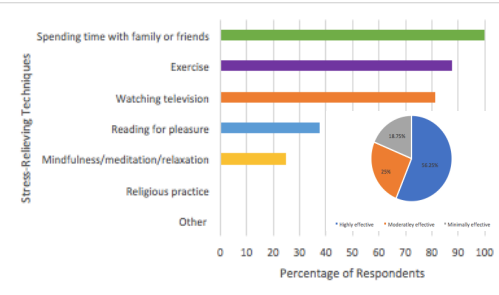


Figure 2. Techniques used by PAEP learners for relieving stress and their effectiveness.

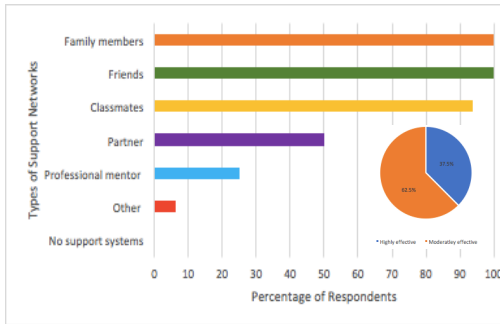


Figure 3. Support networks used by PAEP learners and their effectiveness.

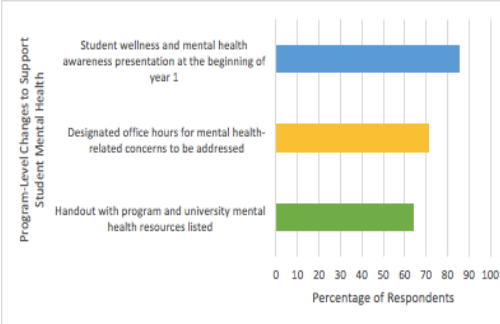


Figure 4. Effective program-level interventions to improve mental health support.

Future Directions

- Repeat this study design in other Canadian physician assistant education programs.
- Extend the study to include physician assistant students who are in their clinical training.
- Conduct a program-level intervention to support student mental health and re-distribute the survey thereafter.