

What Medical Students Really Think of Wellness Programs: Student Perceptions of Acceptance & Commitment Training

Irene Li, Ngantu Le, Andrew Kim, Bryan Attridge, Maebob Enokenwa, Alison Szarko, Kian Assemi, Roland Watson, Vincent DiMassa, Dr. Nicole Jacobs, Dr. Ramona Houmanfar

Performance System Technologies (PST) Lab, University of Nevada, Reno & University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine



University of Nevada, Reno
School of Medicine

Introduction

- Burnout is a prolonged consequence to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors in the working environment.¹
- Medical students experience significant rates of burnout due to time restrictions, social and academic stressors, and the simultaneous demands of training with major events of life.^{2,3}
- The psychological stresses of COVID-19 may have further exacerbated medical students' baseline elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout.⁴
- Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) has demonstrated efficacy among higher educational settings with improvements in psychological flexibility, academic performance, and the importance of education-related values.^{5,6}
- Research has yet to investigate the efficacy of ACT in the specific context of medical education.
- This study aimed to investigate medical students' perceptions of ACT as part of their wellness curriculum, to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on overall perceptions and utilizations of ACT, and to use this information to guide wellness curricular programming for medical schools.

Methods

Participants: 14 MS1 and 11 MS2 students (N=25)

Setting:

- During their first year of medical school, students completed online interactive ACT modules, as well as in-person or online follow-up sessions.
- A voluntary post-training survey was administered during Fall 2020 via Qualtrics.com.
- Data was collected via third-party (UNR PST lab) to maintain anonymity and meet IRB requirements.

Design: One-time, within-subject sampling

Results

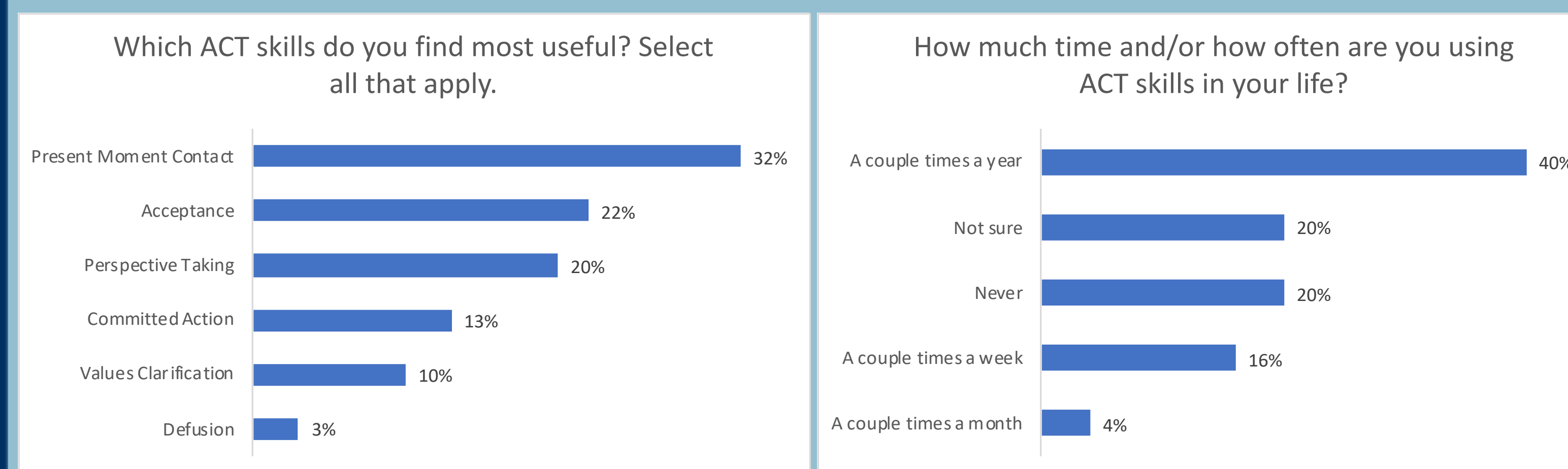


Figure 1. Most useful ACT skills.

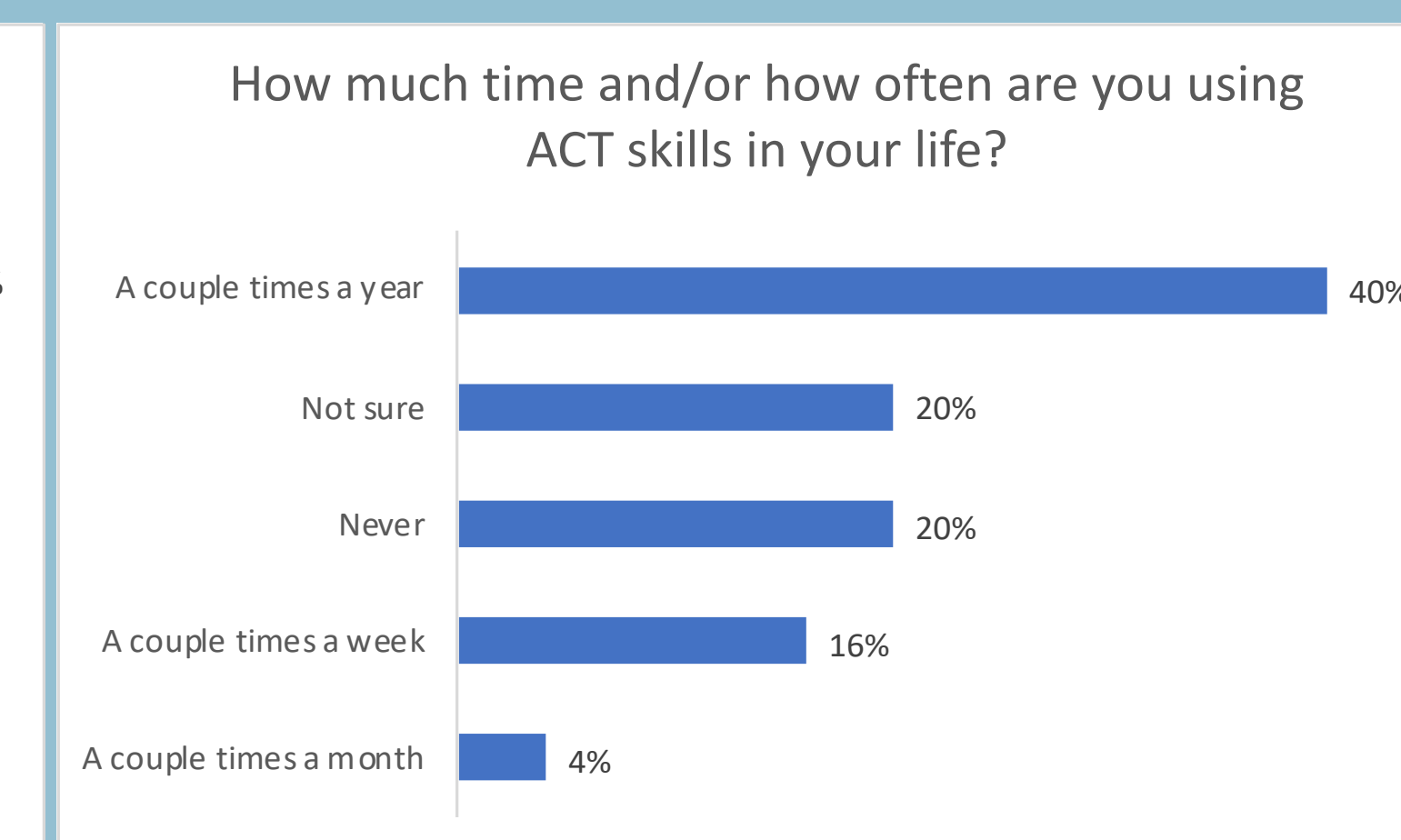


Figure 2. Frequency of use.

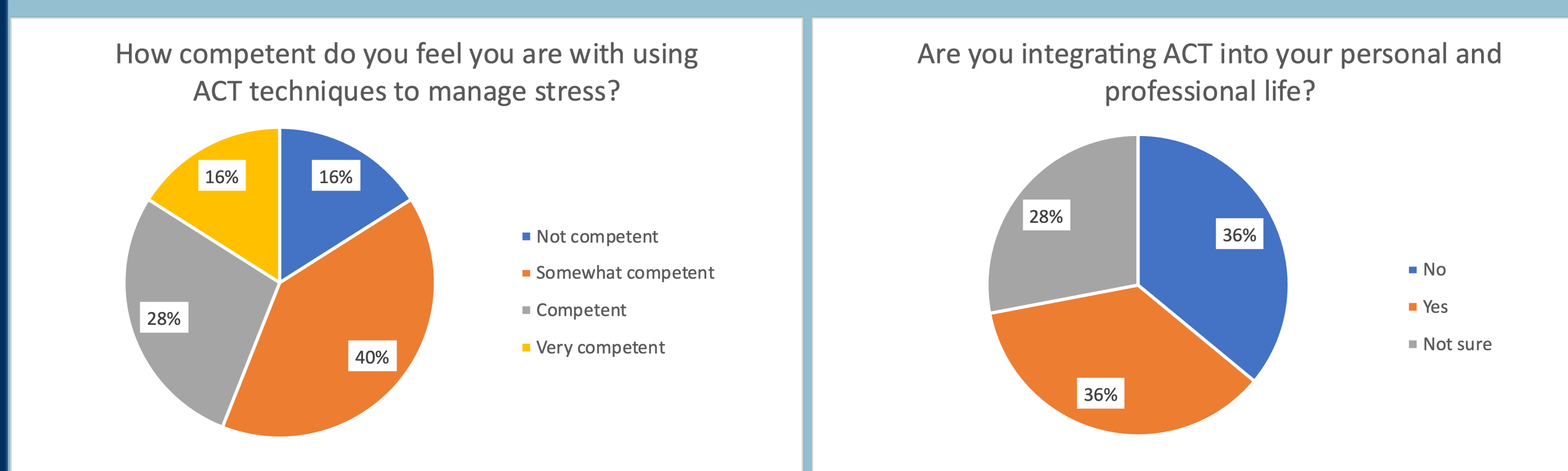


Figure 3. Student competence.

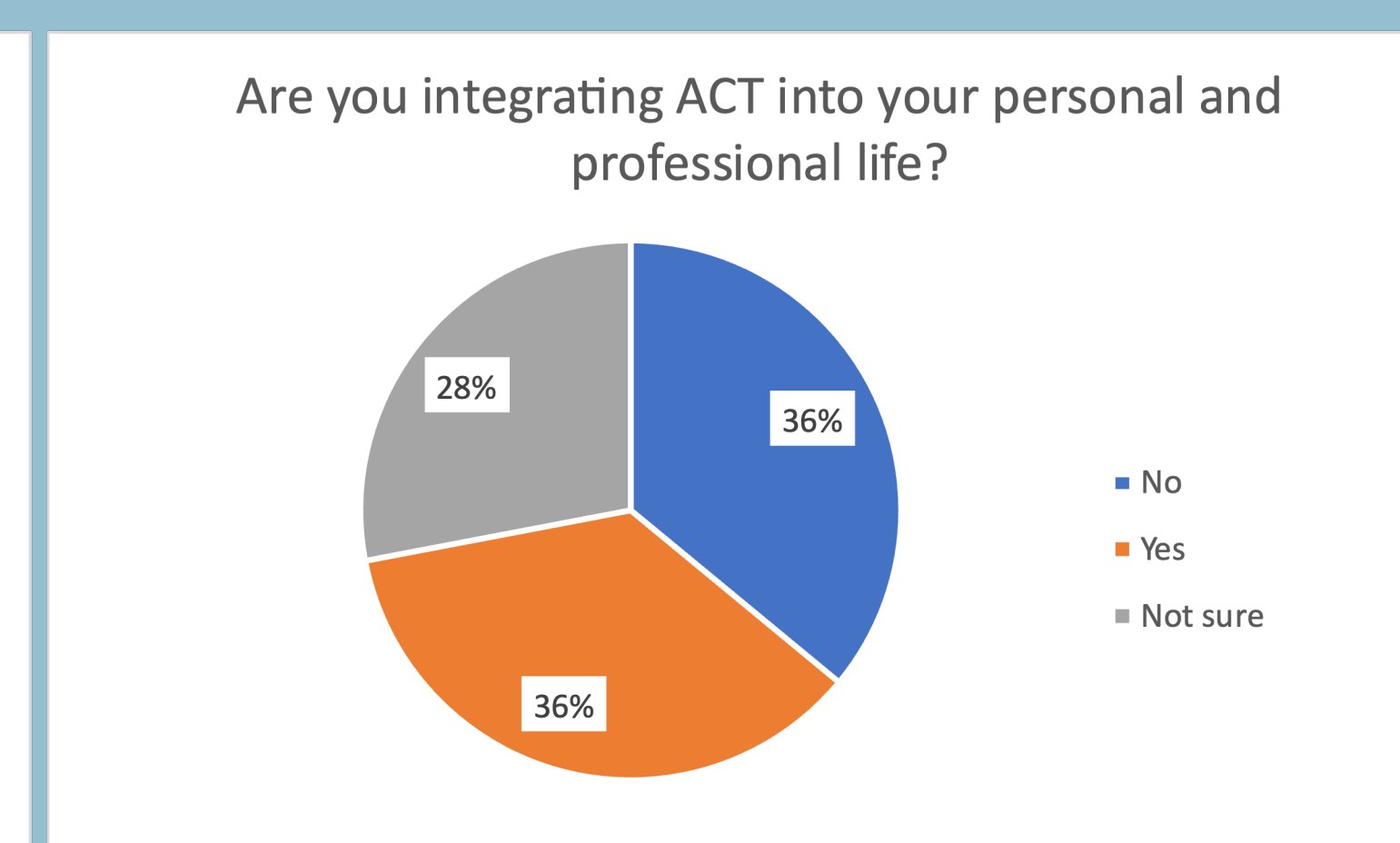


Figure 4. Integration in personal and professional life.

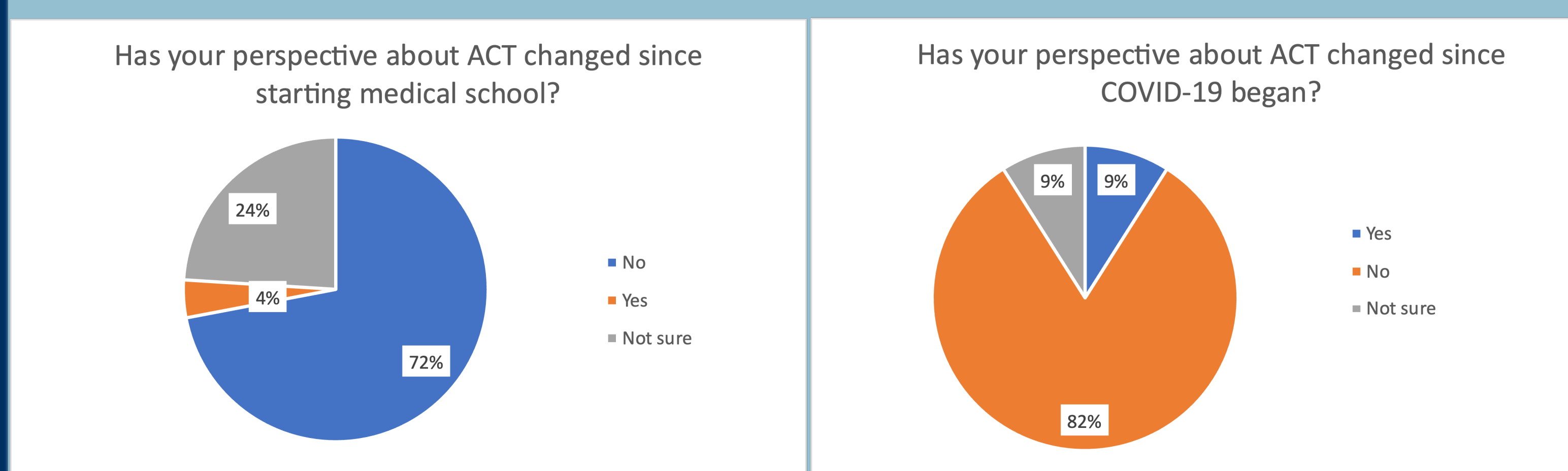


Figure 5. Perception over time.

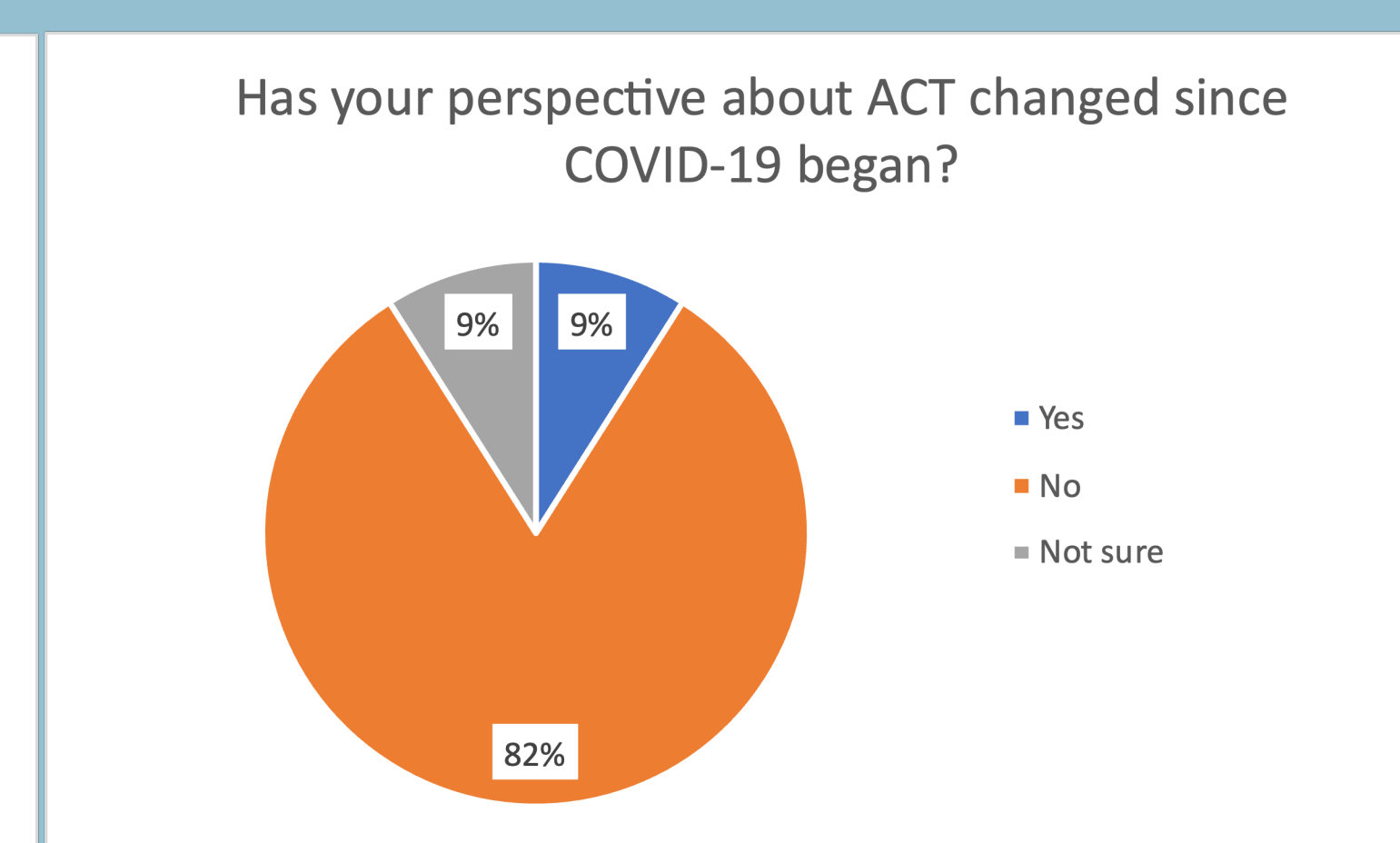


Figure 6. Change in perception of ACT following COVID-19.

How can medical educators better train students to develop psychological flexibility in both their personal and professional lives? (Selected Comments)

- "Talking about their own experiences and vulnerabilities."
- "Maybe group meetings to discuss experiences we have where we use ACT training, or where we think we could have used it."
- "More personal stories of how they cope and issues they have come across."
- "Exposure! I think people have to be exposed to all sorts of different circumstance and people of different walks of life."

Summary

- "Present Moment Contact," "Acceptance," and "Perspective Taking" were the most frequently used ACT skills (Fig. 1).
- Many students reported using ACT skills at least "a couple times a year" (64%), while some students reported "never" (20%) or "not sure" (20%). (Fig. 2).
- 84% of students reported feeling at least "somewhat competent" with using ACT skills to manage stress (Fig. 3).
- 36% of students reported integrating ACT into their everyday personal and professional life. (Fig. 4).
- Students' perceptions about ACT remained stable since starting medical school and since COVID-19 began. (Figs. 5 and 6).

Discussion

- Further research is needed to obtain a higher N and determine the role of ACT within medical education.
- The significant portion of students who reported feeling "not sure" in several categories (Figs. 2, 4, and 5) may indicate uncertainty or confusion regarding how ACT skills may be practiced.
- Medical students may benefit from ACT metaphors that are specifically designed to relate to their unique pre-clinical and clinical experiences.
- Students reported an appreciation for faculty's willingness to openly share their personal experiences related to stress and resiliency. This may reflect the importance of open discussions and mentorship in reducing stigma surrounding mental health topics. Additionally, faculty contributions may illustrate that wellness is a perpetual journey of self-reflection and improvement.

References

1. Maslach C, Jackson SE. The measurement of experienced burnout. *J Occup Behav*. 1981;2(2):99-113.
2. Dyrbye LN, West CP, Satele D, Boone S, Tan L, Sloan J, Shanafelt TD. (2014). Burnout among U.S. medical students, residents, and early career physicians relative to the general U.S. population. *American Medicine*, 89(3), 443-451. DOI: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000000134
3. Mian A, Kim D, Chen D, Ward WL (2018) Medical Student and Resident Burnout: A Review of Causes, Effects, and Prevention. *J Fam Med Dis Prev* 4:094. doi.org/10.28937/2468-5793/1510094
4. Halperin SJ, Henderson MN, Prenzner S, Grauer JN. Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Among Medical Students During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study. *J Med Educ*. 2021 Feb 15;8:2382120521991150. doi: 10.1177/2382120521991150. PMID: 33644399; PMCID: PMC7890732
5. Chase, J.A., Houmanfar, R.A., Hayes, S.C., et al. Values are not just goals: Online ACT-based values training adds to goal setting in improving undergraduate college student performance. *J Contextual Behav Sci*. 2013;2(3-4):75-84. doi:10.1016/j.jcbs.2013.08.002
6. Paillinas D, Belisle J, Dixon MR. A Randomized Control Trial to Evaluate the Use of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to Increase Academic Performance and Psychological Flexibility in Graduate Students. *Behav Anal Pract*. 2018;11(3):241-253. Published 2018 May 7. doi:10.1007/s40617-018-0252-x