

A Study of the Stressors of Residency Interview Season in Fourth-Year Medical Students

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Background

Medical students endure high levels of stress during their education, which is associated with poor sleep quality, depression, and burnout.^{1,2} Interview season is especially stressful for students; one study found that 28% of medical students show signs of above-average stress during this time, leading to a nine-fold increase in the risk of burnout.³ This study aims to further understand the mental health stressors surrounding interview season in medical students.

Methodology

67 fourth-year medical students were surveyed from University of Texas McGovern Medical School at Houston. Survey was focused on mental health stressors during the residency application cycle of 2018-19. This study was approved by UT Health IRB Committee.

Results

Stressors assessed were mental health symptoms, interview logistics, and finances. Most respondents were female and ages 22-27, and 36% were Asian. 37.2% were pursuing either pediatrics, psychiatry, or internal medicine, with remaining going into subspecialties. The vast majority endorsed anxiety symptoms at least 1-2 times per month. Stressors regarding scheduling interviews included: using different scheduling platforms (44%), limited access to a device (78%), lack of interview spots (37%), and overlapping interview dates (37%). 83% of students received no housing assistance for most interviews. Most students experienced significant stress over the cost of interviews. Almost all students received no formal session on financial management. Of note, most applicants also reported effective coping with stressors at least 1-2 times per month.

Table 1. Mental Health Stressors of Subjects

Mental Health	
Anxiety symptoms	Vast majority reported at least 1-2 times/month (feeling nervous/stressed, unable to control important things in life, upset by unexpected event)
Resilience	Majority reported confidence in their ability to handle personal problems, feeling that life was going well
Coping	39% felt that they were able to cope with stressors 61% felt overwhelmed at least 1-2 times/month
Irritation and anger	Vast majority able to control irritations in life 72% felt angered by events out of their control at least 1-2 times/month
Application Process	
Applications	47% applied to 26-50 programs
Interview Invitations	64% received >10 interviews
Interviews attended	45% attended 11-15 interviews, 35% attended <10
Scheduling	
Stress of scheduling	41% felt “a lot” to “a great deal” of stress related to scheduling
Number of platforms used	44% required to use 4 different scheduling platforms
Assistance	42% required assistance from someone else to schedule interviews
Lack of spots	37% unable to attend an interview due to lack of interview spots
Overlapping dates	37% unable to attend an interview due to overlapping dates
Finances	
Financial stress	Most applicants felt “a lot” or a “great deal” of stress due to cost of interviews
Cost prohibition	25% turned down interviews due to cost prohibition
Financial literacy	96% received no formal financial training, 73% received informal financial advice through networks
Housing	
Assistance	83% received no housing assistance for most interviews

Table 2. Demographics of Subjects

Age (Years)	86% 22-27, 14% 28-36
Gender	31% males / 69% females
Ethnicity	56% Caucasian / 36% Asian / 6% African American
Dual-Appealing	10% Yes / 90% No
Couples Matching	9% Yes / 91% No
Specialty	10 Pediatrics / 9 Psychiatry / 6 Internal Medicine / 6 Anesthesiology / 6 OB-GYN

Discussion

During interview season, fourth-year medical students experience significant stress related to mental health, logistics, and finances. Since this study was administered, COVID-19 has dramatically changed the interview landscape as most programs are conducting virtual interviews this past year. Our future study will be to compare the stress experienced by 4th-year medical students during virtual interview with traditional on-site interview and to provide informative results for medical schools and residency programs to utilize in the future.

References:

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