

PRACTICAL TRAINING OF STUDENTS - A MOTIVATING FACTOR FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL MUTUAL AID IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of the entire society and is placing everyone, especially medical professionals, in an unusual and stressful situation. Educational institutions have had to take urgent measures to provide psychosocial assistance and support to their students to cope with stress and build resilience during the pandemic.

The main objective of the present study is to evaluate the effectiveness of psychosocial mutual help training and students' motivation for practical work in a digital environment through a shared virtual space of the web-platform "STOP COVID-19 STRESS".

Material and methods: A semi-structured interview was conducted among students from Medical University - Plovdiv, Republic of Bulgaria and the University "St. Kliment Ohridski" city of Bitola, Republic of North Macedonia in July 2022 during training "STOP COVID-19 STRESS" with a focus on motivation for student mutual aid and psycho-emotional support during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Results: Students indicate that they are sufficiently motivated to actively engage and provide mutual assistance and psycho-emotional support to build strategies and techniques for stress prevention and management. Medical specialists, as a result of practical training, successfully form groups of students in a digital environment, provide psychological and social support to students who are vulnerable to the consequences of a prolonged epidemic situation. Psychosocial well-being and positive outcomes obtained through activities, mutual assistance and social inclusion lead to improved opportunities to achieve optimal healthy functioning, motivation to change lifestyles and promote good practices in a digital environment to address challenges in daily practice.

Conclusions: Innovative practical work in a digital environment through a shared virtual space on the web-platform "STOP COVID-19 STRESS" is a key contribution to improving the skills of active mutual assistance and tolerance of an inclusive student community. The study confirmed the satisfaction of the participants in conducting practical training in a digital environment, with a significant contribution to the formation of knowledge, skills and professional competence through a web-based platform.

Keywords: student mutual aid, practical training, COVID - 19 pandemic.

1 INTRODUCTION

The ongoing crisis situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the risk and has had a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of populations around the world. Multiple psychosocial problems such as unpredictability, blocking and physical distancing were exacerbated, leading to social isolation [1]. High levels of stress, uncertainty, fear, tension, depression and maladjustment have been reported among a large part of society [2].

The student community is among those significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of educational opportunities during the state of emergency, as well as the transition to a remote electronic environment. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly posed many challenges to medical universities, but it has also created an opportunity for a revolution in medical education [3].

The mental aspects of the consequences of the epidemic and post-epidemic situation for students are mainly associated with disruption of social activities, the form and organization of studies, restrictions on travel and entertainment, as well as concern for personal and public health [4].

In the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has become an actual stressor as a predisposing factor regarding the condition of students [5]. The current situation brings many losses (personal or professional),

of physical and mental health, of social life, of various rights and freedoms (free movement), related to limiting the opportunities to satisfy social, physiological and emotional needs of medical specialists [6].

In this regard, to cope with stress and build resilience during the pandemic, many educational institutions have had to take urgent measures to provide psycho-social help and support to their students.

In medical education, as a means of preventing the consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, interactive and emotionally impactful approaches are increasingly included in various trainings, seminars and other forms of practical training on projects or specific social and cultural activities. The competence approach is applied, based on modern technologies for training and self-help, which contribute to the development of independence, initiative, creativity and critical thinking among students. There is a growing need for socially and technologically educated medical professionals capable of constructing their personal and professional empathic behavior for the benefit of society.

Within the framework of the "STOP COVID-19 STRESS" Project, innovative solutions of particular importance for the student target group and for public health in general are offered.

In order to overcome the difficulties faced by students as a result of the prolongation of the COVID-19 pandemic, practical training was conducted for motivated students /volunteers/ to implement psychosocial mutual assistance in a digital environment. The training was aimed at building mental and physical resilience in students to deal with the consequences of the epidemic and post-epidemic situation and improve their personal functioning and sense of well-being on campus through a web-based platform with panels on preventive programs and social inclusion. The psychosocial experience of the students acquired through practical trainings is not the result of passive perception, but real activity and an attitude of mutual assistance in the form of values, attitudes, orientation and social adaptation. Socialization covers all processes related to learning, inclusion in society, which allow students to participate in social life [7].

2 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study design was used to investigate student attitudes and satisfaction regarding learning, participation, and implementation of resilience-building activities among the student community. A semi-structured interview was conducted among students from the Medical University of Plovdiv and the University of "St. Kliment Ohridski" Bitola after training on the project "STOP COVID-19 STRESS" in the period 22 – 24 July 2022. A total of 12 students participated in the training - 8 students from Plovdiv Medical University and 4 from the project partner university, and all of them were interviewed after the training. A semi-structured questionnaire included 15 questions, of which 5 related to the demographic characteristics of the respondents, 6 closed questions related to their participation in previous volunteer actions, as well as their satisfaction with the training and their attitudes to long-term participation in mutual help groups to cope with stress among students community and 4 open questions regarding their motivation for participating in the project and their assessment of the effectiveness of the studied techniques.

3 RESULTS

The response rate in the questionnaire survey was 100% (12 students). The mean \pm SD respondent's age was 23.00 ± 1.228 years and 58.33% (n=7) of them were women. The students included in the study are from the third year and above, and their distribution by faculties is as follows in Table 1.

All students included in the training have participated in voluntary or charitable initiatives, as well as in mutual aid groups. All of them confirmed that they were previously informed about the purpose and topics of the training.

Table 1. The students' distribution by faculties

<i>The students' distribution by faculties</i>	<i>Relative share</i>
Higher Medical School – Bitola	33% (n=4)
Faculty of Medicine of the Medical University of Plovdiv	33% (n=4)
Faculty of Dentistry of the Medical University of Plovdiv	17%(n=2)
Faculty of Pharmacy of the Medical University of Plovdiv	17%(n=2)

In the ongoing crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, stress, anxiety and tension are a daily occurrence for medical students. For the altruistic idea of volunteering their time to help other students or to join a volunteer action is an extraordinary manifestation of mutual aid. Volunteering and charitable initiatives lead to dozens of mental and physical benefits that positively affect the life of a person who gives of their time to help others. One of the biggest effects is the reduction in stress and strain levels of students who provide psychosocial support.

Fisk S. points out that people need cognition /desire to communicate/, which is the basis of social motives related to the need for belonging, understanding, self-affirmation and trust [8]. It is a fact that people are motivated to belong, which becomes a prerequisite for solidarity, interaction, mutual relationship and mutual assistance, adaptation and social connections [9].

The results of our study indicate that students who are actively involved in volunteering have lower levels of stress than those in a normal educational environment and are significantly more adaptive in stressful situations.

To the question "What motivated you to take part in this training?", the answers were quite diverse: from new acquaintances to self-improvement, with most leading motivational factor being interest in psychology and the impact of the pandemic on the person.

The main social motivations for inclusion in practical training reveal the individual and group needs of medical students, divided into two subcategories of the need for affiliation. The surveyed students have different interest and motivation, in 83.33% they are driven by cognitive motives - understanding /need for sharing and communication/ and 75.00% by affective motives - self-affirmation /need or opportunity for improvement, development/. The lowest is the need for control 33.00%. (Table 2.)

Table 2. Interrelationship between the main social motives for inclusion in practical training of students

<i>Belonging to the student community</i>			
<i>Relatively cognitive motives</i>		<i>Relatively affective motives</i>	
Understanding /need to share/	83.33% (n=10)	Self-affirmation /need or opportunity for improvement/	75.00% (n=9)
Control /need to perceive interconnectedness/	33.00% (n=4)	Trust /ability to see others as intrinsically good/	66.66% (n=8)

Students indicate that they are motivated to actively engage and provide mutual assistance and psycho-emotional support to build strategies and techniques for stress prevention and management. Social motives and belonging to the student community at the Medical University - Plovdiv help to form empathy on a personal and professional level.

100% of the interviewed students answered that the topics included in the training were extremely interesting for them, and among the most interesting methods and techniques for dealing with stress they indicated the breathing exercises and the questionnaires for assessing the personality type.

According to the analysis of the results, the most effective techniques and strategies for coping with stress are psychotherapeutic guidelines for increasing resilience. The students' preferred methods are presented in Fig. 1.

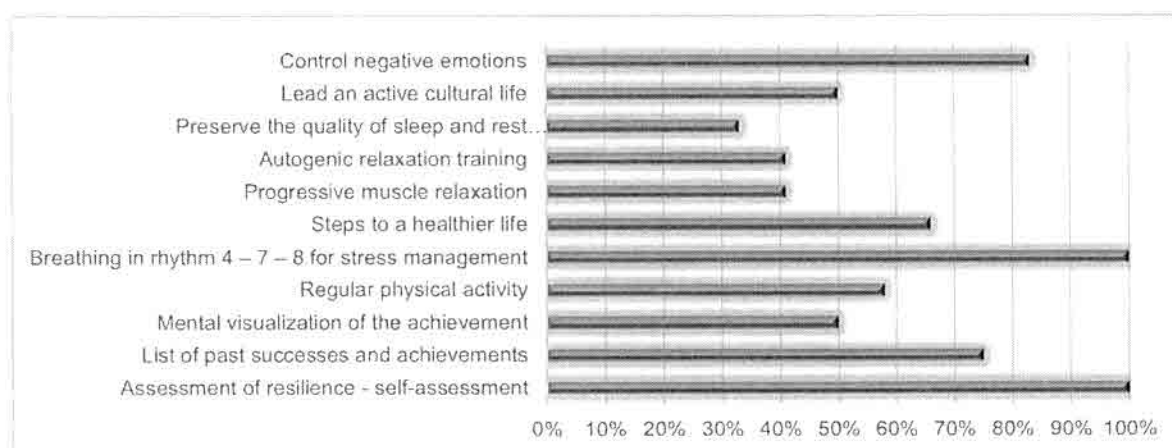


Figure 1. Distribution of the students' useful methods for building resilience

Having stress management skills and competencies can have a powerful impact on student well-being. The toolkit for building resilience is a prerequisite for effectively dealing with the risks of burnout and building mental resilience in a professional environment [10, 11]. The students' practical training contributes to the formation of positive self-evaluation and beliefs about their own efficacy, personal stress resistance, a positive attitude towards challenges and the ability to build social support.

Medical students develop a range of psychosocial skills for mutual support, being motivated to improve themselves through psychotherapeutic techniques, self-reflection and coaching.

As a result of the practical training, the students successfully formed groups of volunteers to provide psychological and social support in a digital environment to their colleagues showing vulnerability from the effects of the extended epidemic situation. Their attitude towards using an online platform for consultation or a mobile application for contact and provision of psychosocial assistance is positive.

In general, the students were extremely satisfied with the training, with 83.33% (n=10) being completely satisfied and 16.67% (n=2) being satisfied.

The expected impacts regarding the target group of students is related to improving mental health and increasing resistance to stress in the conditions of the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, as well as professional development and engagement (acquisition of functional and organizational skills for mutual assistance and specific coping skills in various life situations necessary for the medical profession).

4 CONCLUSIONS

The study confirmed the satisfaction of the participants in conducting practical training in a digital environment, with a significant contribution to the formation of knowledge, skills and professional competence through a web-based platform. Innovative practical work in a digital environment through a shared virtual space on the web-platform "STOP COVID-19 STRESS" is a key contribution to improving the skills of active mutual assistance and tolerance of the inclusive student community.

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