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Extracurricular activities associated with stress and burnout in preclinical medical students

Jawad Fares^{a,*}, Zein Saadeddin^a, Hayat Al Tabosh^a, Hussam Aridi^a, Christopher El Mouhayyar^a, Mohamad Karim Koleilat^a, Monique Chaaya^b, Khalil El Asmar^b

^a Faculty of Medicine, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

^b Department of Epidemiology and Population Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

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Abstract This study aims to assess the prevalence of stress and burnout among preclinical medical students in a private university in Beirut, Lebanon, and evaluate the association between extracurricular involvement and stress and burnout relief in preclinical medical students. A cross-sectional survey was conducted on a random sample of 165 preclinical medical students. Distress level was measured using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) while that of burnout was measured through the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (MBI-SS). The MBI-SS assesses three interrelated dimensions: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy. Extracurricular activities were divided into four categories: physical exercise, music, reading, and social activities. All selected participants responded. A substantial proportion of preclinical medical students suffered from stress (62%) and burnout (75%). Bivariate and multivariate regression analyses revealed that being a female or a 1st year medical student correlated with higher stress and burnout. Music-related activities were correlated with lower burnout. Social activities or living with parents were associated with lower academic efficacy. The high stress and burnout levels call for action. Addressing the studying conditions and attending to the psychological wellbeing of preclinical medical students are recommendations made in the study.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jyf04@mail.aub.edu (J. Fares).

1. Introduction

Medical education is a long emotionally taxing journey. Although most studies focus on medical residents and practicing physicians, stress and burnout arborize as early as the first year of medical school, proceed throughout residency, and surmount throughout the daily practice of physicians [1].

Stress is defined by Lazarus and Folkman [2] as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being”. Unlike stress which may be experienced in all life aspects, burnout is a work-related syndrome that is usually seen in occupations that require caring for others such as social work, teaching, and healthcare professions [3]. According to Maslach [4], burnout has three interrelated dimensions that include emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished feeling of personal accomplishment. During the past decades, various studies on student burnout have been carried out [5–7]. These studies assessed “academic burnout” in students.

Stress and burnout progressively develop over the course of medical education. During both preclinical and clinical years, medical students are expected to take responsibilities of patients and learn an immense amount of facts and concepts with a limited amount of time and memory, which makes medical school a stressful environment. Studies on medical students have indicated the development of stress and burnout in the preclinical medical education and its progression into clinical years [8].

Medical students use different means for coping with stress and burnout. Strategies that focus on extracurricular activities tend to involve engagements such as problem solving, positive interpretation, reliance on social support, and expression of emotion, enabling students to respond in a manner that leads to adaptation [9]. As such, extracurricular activities may constitute a haven where students aim to utilize, and perhaps refine and develop, their interpersonal skills. Career counselors, student advisors, and recruiters commonly stress the importance of a student being well-rounded and the dangers of being perceived by recruiters as one dimensional or just “book smart” [9]. Furthermore, extracurricular activities can reduce anxiety, stress, and burnout and their effects on mental and physical health [8].

The number of studies tackling stress and burnout among medical students has been on the rise

in the past few years; however, most have focused on the clinical years rather than the preclinical years [10,11]. Furthermore, there are no studies that focus on the association between the involvement in extracurricular activities and relief of stress and burnout levels among preclinical medical students. Thus, this study aims to: (1) assess the prevalence of stress and burnout among preclinical medical students in a private university in Beirut, Lebanon; and (2) evaluate the association between extracurricular involvement and stress and burnout relief in the preclinical medical student.

2. Methods

2.1. Setting and population

The present study was conducted in the Faculty of Medicine at the American University of Beirut (AUB), a private university in Beirut, Lebanon. The Faculty of Medicine was established in 1867 by American missionaries in Lebanon and Syria who asked Dr. Daniel Bliss to withdraw from the evangelistic work of the mission in Lebanon to start a college of higher learning. The college would include a medical school and provide services in the realms of medical education, training, and healthcare to the constituencies of Lebanon and the Middle East region. Its foundational undergraduate medical program is the 4-year Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) program (Med I through Med IV). All applicants must hold a Bachelor’s degree and must have completed the premedical requirements as well as the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). The structure of the curriculum is lecture-based, discipline-oriented, and imparts basic medical sciences in the first 2 years, followed by clinical disciplines in the last 2 years. The preclinical students of Med I and Med II were available to participate in this study.

2.2. Study design

A cross-sectional survey of Med I and Med II students was conducted in January 2015 using a 34-item self-administered questionnaire. The institutional review board of AUB approved the study. Each participant was provided with a consent form explaining the purpose of the study before filling in the questionnaire. A total of 205 preclinical medical undergraduates from Med I (105 students) and Med II (100 students) were approached. The students were asked to complete a set of questionnaires consisting of three parts, namely: demographic

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