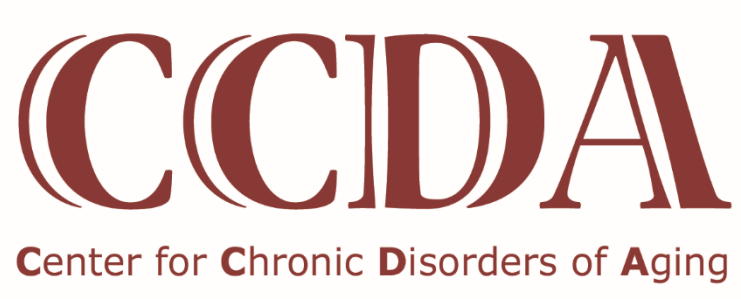




Utilizing a Peer Forum to Address Mental Health in the Medical School Setting

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Background

Medical students are at a particularly higher risk and incidence of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation compared to the general population.¹ Burnout, which is experienced by up to 50% of all medical students, leads to suicide ideation, serious thoughts of dropping out of medical school, and an inverse relationship with empathy towards others.² Thus, there is a need to address the mental health of students as a component of professional development.

Overview

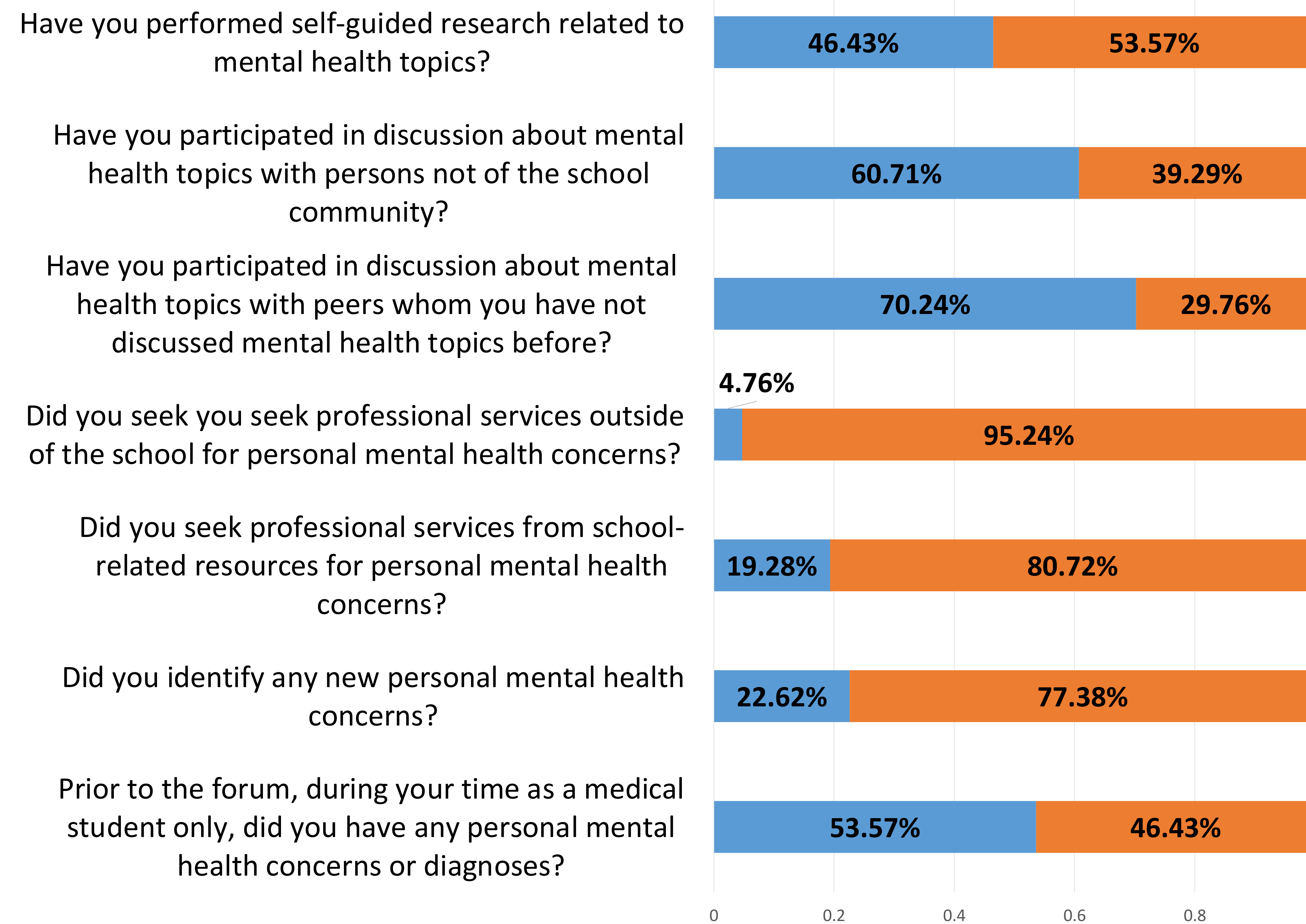
Lawn et. al. originally demonstrated that a peer-lead open discussion forum can lessen the cognitive stigma of mental illness in the medical student population, specifically among second-year medical students.³ With this in mind, our follow-up study expanded the forum to include first-year students and sought to examine if behavior change and help-seeking behaviors resulted as a function of attending the mental health forum. It was proposed that this student-led, student-only discussion forum among medical students would incite new, continued discussion of mental health topics, help-seeking behavior for professional treatment, and additional self-guided education about mental health topics.

Methods

This study reviewed surveys (IRB #H19-076X) of first and second-year students over two years. Surveys were sent one month after a two-hour student Mental Health Perspective forum. The survey inquired about existing mental health concerns and help-seeking behaviors specifically resulting from the forum.

Survey Results: First and Second-Year Student Attendees

As a result of the forum:



Results - Highlights

- 54% of all 84 responding attendees endorsed mental health concerns or diagnoses during their time in medical school and, when assessed separately, remained at 51% and 56% for first and second year classes, respectively.
- 22.62% of respondents endorsed identification of new personal mental health concerns as a result of the forum.
- Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) sought professional mental health services through the school's provided resources.
- 5% sought professional services outside of the school's provided resources, endorsing non-psychiatry primary care providers, which were endorsed the most frequently, followed by psychology/behavioral health/counseling and psychiatry specialty care.
- 70% of attendees reported discussing mental health topics with peers whom they did not discuss mental health topics before.
- 61% continued the conversation with others outside of the school community.
- 46% of attendees performed self-guided research on mental health topics following the forum.

Intervention Design

- One week prior to the forum, students voluntarily submitted mental health narratives via Google Forms based on personal experiences.
- Students had the option to sit on a panel of peers to share their narrative with the group or to remain anonymous, in which case student facilitators or other volunteers read the narratives to the group.
- First and second year MHP forums were held independently and narrative submissions were shared only to the respective cohorts from which they came in order to maintain class privacy.
- The forum itself began with opening statements and education about current mental health statistics by MHP student coordinators, followed by the sharing of stories by the narrative writers themselves or anonymous reading by student volunteers.
- After the sharing of each narrative, open discussions were allowed among the group and student leaders who were prepared to facilitate conversation.
- Of note, no faculty was present. However, one non-faculty, licensed mental health professional was present for purposes of professional help and facilitation based on student vote.

Conclusion

This study exemplifies the value of open discussion in the realm of mental health, especially in graduate medical education. Events like the MHP forum are a cost-effective and influential modality with the potential to influence positive behaviors such as seeking professional mental health services, continued mental health discussion even outside of the school community, and self-guided research on mental health topics.

Acknowledgements

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