

## MEDICAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SELF-CARE AND WHAT THEY DO FOR IT

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To assess the medical students' awareness regarding self-care and its significance. It was also intended to assess what methods/strategies they adopt for self-care and which one they expect to be part of their official curriculum.

**Study Design:** Qualitative (phenomenology) study.

**Place and Duration of Study:** The study was carried out at Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Medical University, Larkana from Jun 2018 to Jan 2019.

**Methodology:** Non-probability purposive sampling technique was used for participants' recruitment. By using semi-structured interview protocol, to the point of data saturation, 13 medical-students were interviewed. For data analysis, thematic analysis was carried out manually.

**Results:** We have found three superordinate themes, the first superordinate theme was about the nature of problems and issues that have been faced by medical students i.e. academic and hostel issues, the second super ordinate theme was coping strategies and it is related to managing ways that medical students used to deal with stresses, the third one was suggestions for official improvements which was related to recommendation for official personals to bring a change in curriculum in order to overcome stress in medical students.

**Conclusion:** The medical students used different strategies for self-care and gave recommendations for inclusion of different strategies in official course curriculum in reference to their self-care perception. So, it may be helpful in addressing issue of increasing burnout among medical students and help increasing resilience.

**Keywords:** Burnout, Health promotion, Medical students, Self-care.

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## INTRODUCTION

Self-care is a behavior directed towards enhancement of one's health and achieving self-improvement<sup>1</sup>. But medical students deprive self-care behavior and hence their lives confers higher level of depression, stress and anxiety<sup>2</sup>. This burnout syndrome may affect up to 50% of students<sup>3</sup>. Academic pressures and medical school environment related stressors as study burden, competitive rather than collaborative academic environment, unfair marks and assessment techniques, sleep deprivation and peers' negative attitudes, poor support system, authoritarian or strict teachers and teacher-centered learning promoted burnout and it worsen when the personal life stressors and events are collaboratively added in

their lives in the form of major illness, financial constraints, death in family, marriages and child birth during medical education. These elements make it difficult for them to prioritize their own physical, medical and psychological needs. Therefore, medical students are less commonly involved in adopting the self-care strategies and behaviors that direct towards enhancement of health, recreation and self-improvement<sup>4-7</sup>.

Recently a study highlighted the importance of self-care behavior in medical students. The authors investigated about the self-reported engagement with self-care behavior and its association with stress and quality of life. The results revealed that self-reported engagement with self-care behavior basically moderates the relationship with perceived stress and quality of life. The self-care behavior has negative association with perceived stress. It is clear that engagement in self-care activities actually decreases the

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magnitude of stress and inertly sustains resilience in medical students<sup>8</sup>.

Another recent mixed method study reported that the medical students tend to use a wide range of highly individualized stress reduction behaviors<sup>1</sup>. Wellness/self-care strategies may be pre-determined or student-identified. Because every person has unique way to manifest self-care behavior as physical exercise, spiritual growth, nutrition, interpersonal relations, stress management<sup>9</sup>. When student-identified strategies became included in curriculum, this may significantly contribute in physical and psychological wellbeing of medical students and professionals and ultimately improved patient care<sup>10,11</sup>. Many studies have addressed predetermined wellness behaviors such as exercise, sleep, stress management, mindfulness training and meditation<sup>12,13</sup>. Stress coping strategies and resilience strengthening activities are part of self-care<sup>14</sup>.

A study investigated about the medical students' stress level and sense of well-being after six weeks of yoga and meditation. Total 13 female and 14 male medical students participated in this program. The results of the program showed improvement in their feelings with the addition of positive feeling of peace, focus, stamina, happiness, self-confidence and personal satisfaction<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, another mindfulness base stress reduction (MBSR) intervention reported an improvement in perceived stress and self-compassion of medical students. Furthermore, it improved the first year's medical student's self-reflection, self-awareness and self-care<sup>16,17</sup>.

A specific program, Vanderbilt Medical Student (VMS), was designed to address the wellness needs of medical students. It has two approaches proactive and reactive. The proactive approaches deal with the idea of prevention that is basically a programming which helps to root off the problems before it starts. The reactive approaches consist of effective intervention strategies for medical students whose wellness badly effected and significantly deteriorated. The VMS Wellness Program designed to facilitate the medical

students to access resources of healing and dealing with their stressors, as most of the shove of the program revolved around the proactive approach to selfcare which is engaging students in a program of health promotion early and throughout their training of this program. The aim of the VMS Wellness Program was to lower down student's risk of developing many common psychological problems like burn-out and depression etc. that badly affected the medical students. Furthermore this VMS Wellness Program also provide help to maximize medical student potential through nurturing their physical as well as their psychological well-being with this effective but longitudinal programming<sup>18,19</sup>.

Although students have described positive experience in these programs, very few have truly taken students' perception on self-care and what they do for it. There is paucity of local literature on the subject matter and also on students' opinion regarding their suggested strategies to be included in medical school education. So, realizing the significance of the issue, the goal of the study is to explored medical student's perception about concept and significance of self-care in their academic life, what they do for it and to discover which strategies they wish to be part of curriculum.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative (phenomenology) study, exploring the perspectives and perception of medical students regarding self-care. After approval of Ethics Review Committee of Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto Medical University (letter No. SMBBMU/OFF REC/88) further procedure was carried out. The duration of the study was June 2018 to January 2019. Inclusion criteria for the study was medical students both male and female from first to final year batches who willingly participated in the study. The students were approached during their class lectures and 3 students from each batch were selected among those who were willing for the interview, by draw method. By using purposive sampling technique 15 students were recruited for the study

but three of them withdraw their consent. So, the total participants were 12 students (7 girls and 5 boys). On the basis of literature, a semi structured interview protocol was created in order to collect data. Students were included in study after their full informed consent. They were assured on the issues of autonomy and confidentiality. A complete information sheet regarding purpose of research was provided to them and their further questions were also entertained. Interview was conducted by main researcher. Full privacy was maintained. Interviews were audio-tapped while none of the participant refused for audio-tape. At the end of each interview, it was ensured that if the audio is recorded appropriately and researcher kept in touch with the participant to clear any point in the interview. (The main researcher continued to refine her interview taking by discussing with other authors). The participants were inquired about the challenges and issues they have faced and the strategies they used. Their suggestion regarding curriculum was also gathered. The interviews remained continued until the point of data saturation.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done through thematic analysis. The step by step manual approach was used<sup>20</sup>. As a first step, we transcribed the audio recording and then translated it in to English language on the Microsoft Word. Familiarity of the data was maintained by read and re-read it and by cross checking with the original content. Furthermore, transcriptions were validated by all authors to ensure the quality of the content. Then as further steps generated initial codes, we searched themes in the data, clustered and reviewed themes and then defined them. Superordinate themes with their subordinate themes and clusters were triangulated together to ensure their accuracy.

**RESULTS**

Result showed three superordinate themes like reasons of stress, coping strategies and suggestions for curriculum and under each of these respective subordinate themes. These themes reflected medical students’ perception of self-care. Further subordinate themes are discussed

**Table-I: Clustering of subordinate themes of academic issues, hostel issues and personal issues.**

Subordinated Themes	Clustering
Academic Issues	Study burden, Lack of test routines, difficulty in subject, early morning classes, teacher’s favoritism, teachers stress inducing behavior, teaching strategies, marks related to stress, lack of schedule
Hostel issues	Lack of facilities, conflicts with room-mates, home sickness
Personal issues	Balance between family and study, other household problems

**Table-II: Clustering of subordinate themes of social activities, fitness related activities, individual relaxation activities and religious activities.**

Subordinated Themes	Clustering
Social Activities	Talk with family, Trips & travelling, to be with friends, Using social media
Fitness related activities	Yoga, exercise, meditation
Individual relaxation activities	Read books, listen music, shopping,
Religious activities	Prayers, Recite Holy rites, have spiritual believes

**Table-III: Clustering of subordinate themes as extra-curriculum activities, suggestions for management and suggestions for teacher.**

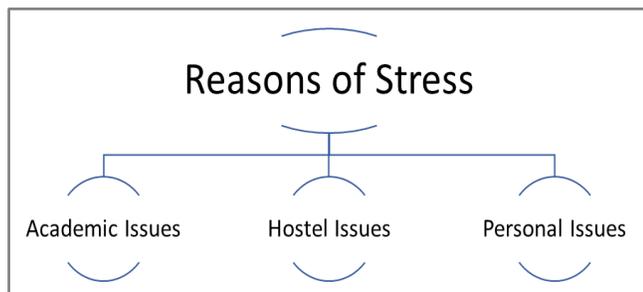
Subordinated Themes	Clustering
Extra-curriculum activities	Talent shows, official tours, competitions, functions, dramas, exhibitions, sports
Suggestions for management	Pre scheduling curriculum calendar dates, regular test system, Exams & marks related suggestion, Creation and activation of societies, Regular counseling sessions, suggested institution polies regarding hostel
Suggestions for teachers	Teaching strategies, Improve teacher behaviors

under each superordinate theme. Superordinate themes and subordinate themes were revalidated through iterative of revisiting the questions and transcription by all the authors.

**Reasons for Stress**

Reasons of stress concluded at three subordinate themes as shown in fig-1.

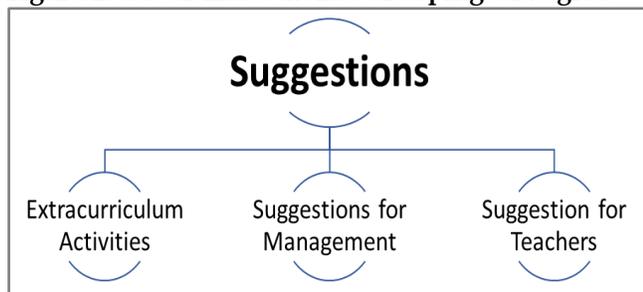
All the participants reported academic issues as the reasons for stress, some of them reported



**Figure-1: Subordinate themes came under the umbrella of reasons of stress.**



**Figure-2: Subordinate themes of coping strategies.**



**Figure-3: Subordinate themes of suggestion for curriculum.**

their worst experiences with teachers, specific subject and management. Almost half of the participants reported conflicts and uncomfortable circumstance in the hostel as lack of electricity, congested room space, difficulties in extreme weather condition and link them with the academic

performance. Few participants reported their personal issues as well all of these clustering of subordinate themes was concluded in table-I.

**Coping Strategies**

Different coping strategies were grouped up in four subordinate themes as shown in fig-2.

Almost all of the participants claimed to use socialization as a coping strategy, sharing problem with the friend and family is frequently reported strategy. Many participants reported reciting and praying only few participants accounted for physical fitness activities. Few reported personal tasks as book reading, shopping and listening music to cope with the stress. All of their clustering was described in the table-II.

**Suggestions for Curriculum**

Suggestions regarding the curriculum by the medical students were concluded at three subordinate themes as shown in fig-3.

Medical students’ suggestions revolved inclusion of extra-curriculum activities in the form of any sort of stress releasing activities and most of the participants highlight importance of trips. Almost all of the participants requested to improve curriculum scheduling and improving teaching strategies. Half of the participants requested to started regular counseling lectures for recovering the daily stress. All of these suggestions clustering are given in the table-III.

**DISCUSSION**

Medical students have high level of stress in their lives which causes emotional and mental disturbance. Along with academic pressure they have many other burdens, as competitive environment and personal issues. These persistent pressures push them towards self-ignorance and poor life styles<sup>2,10,21</sup>. A study asked medical students to rank 7 listed difficulties, male students ranked peer competition as first difficulty while female students ranked it as fourth difficulty. Furthermore, majority of students expressed their dissatisfaction regarding passive and lecture-based teaching methods<sup>22</sup>. The current study explored many academic pressures as the subordi-

nate theme and at the top was the tension regarding examination/test marks, passive teaching methods and excessive workload. Along with that many students highlighted about the system /management related stressors as lack of proper test schedule, poor scheduling of yearly timetable, and the teachers' behavior-related stress. A grounded theory also reported majority of medical students accounted these problems during their medical studies as excessive workload, difficulty managing study and time. The medical students also illustrated about unique system-level concerns or problems like administrative catastrophes, lack of aid or advices with career planning, and assessment-related performance pressure<sup>23</sup>. Along with system related issues, medical students described about education environment related issues as well specifically related to teacher's behavior as favoritism, being non-supportive, and their strict behavior. A study which investigated about the medical school environment, reported that overall students' perception about educational environment was satisfactory but they have whined regarding authoritarian and strict teachers, factual, teacher-centered learning and poor support system for bored<sup>7</sup>.

Medical students perceived personal health and relationships as the most important aspects which are affected during medical school and then damage their wellbeing. Twenty four personal issues were also another source of stress in medical students. At the top of it was difficulty in balancing family and studies. As difficulty in work-life balance and relationships, health related problems and financial stressors as personal problems reported in recent researches<sup>23-25</sup>.

A study revealed the elevated stress level for the hostler students<sup>26</sup>. In our study also, the hostler students showed lot of difficulties and many of them directly expressed out that their study-burden feels more distressing because they don't have facilities like home in the hostel and due to home sickness.

Medical students need to know huge amount of knowledge and skills to regulate these

stressors. Some of the common ways of relieving stressors are listening to music, sharing with friends, physical activities etc<sup>10,26</sup>. Furthermore wellness behaviors such as exercise, sleep, stress management, mindfulness training and meditation are also evident for decreasing stress<sup>12,13</sup>. A latest study reported that medical students were asked to use more frequent emotional strategies than the active strategies in order to cope with daily stressors. The results showed that the indication of coping strategies is related to the clinical academic performance of medical students. The students who use more emotional coping strategies showed poorer clinical academic performance while the students who use active coping strategies showed better academic performance<sup>27</sup>. We also explored many strategies which were used by the medical students in their daily lives to overcome their stress and more than half of them were emotional strategies like call to love ones, weep and share problems with friends, prayers, use of social media and listening music. Most of the male students reported to have trips with friends and only few ones reported exercise and other active strategies.

It is important to take action at official level to overcome these stressors. Stress management interventions for medical student's health, personal and professional lives are very important and it had proven positive outcomes on several areas related to health<sup>28</sup>. In the current study, medical students' suggestion for the improvement of official curriculum in reference to decrease stress was also explored. The students suggested regular counseling classes or courses for stress reduction. While therapists also laid emphasis on the importance of self-care course for medical students which have aim to reducing stress and increasing well-being<sup>29</sup>. A recent study conducted to observe the effect of stress management program for medical students with stress, anxiety and somatization. The results showed that those students who completed the program reported significant decrease in their anxiety and somatization and increase in knowledge of coping. Further the authors suggested that any

such additional well-being programs for medical students can bring many benefits for their psychological and physiological health<sup>30</sup>. In this context, Vanderbilt Medical Students (VMS) wellness and comprehensive wellness-related program are designed for medical students in small and large groups. It has three core principles Mentoring and advising, Student leadership, and personal growth<sup>18</sup>.

The further suggestions were related to the scheduling of academic tasks and most of the suggestion were related to completions, functions, physical activities like official trips, and sports. There is a strong theoretical evidence suggested the effectiveness of physical activities and counseling in official curriculum for medical students<sup>31</sup>. There is a very strong relationship between physical activities and level of stress. Rao investigated the level of physical activities and stress in undergraduate medical students and he found statistically significant negative relationship between these two factors that showed high stress level in those students who have low physical activities while those students who demonstrated high physical activities have low stress level comparatively<sup>32</sup>. A study investigated about the provision of physical activities in 17 Australian medical schools' curricula while the results showed that 15 claimed that they provided specific physical activities training to medical students. In these 15 schools 13 are those who taught the national aerobic and the other seven taught national strength training. Half of the respondents illustrated no barriers for the implementing physical activity training for their medical curricula<sup>33</sup>. So, it is evidence that medical schools in Pakistan can also implement students' suggestions in their curricula for a better academic outcomes.

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### RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is first of its kind in Pakistan regarding self-care. It was student-centered in app-

roach. Students' valuable opinion can be taken regarding inclusion of the subject and strategies in course-curriculum. The results may be helpful in addressing issue of increasing burnout among medical students and help increasing resilience.

### CONCLUSION

The medical students used different strategies for self-care and gave recommendations for inclusion of different strategies in official course curriculum in reference to their self-care perception. So, it may be helpful in addressing issue of increasing burnout among medical students and help increasing resilience.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This study has no conflict of interest to be declared by any author.

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