4 ways peer relationships differ in residency from med school

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The world you knew as a medical student changes dramatically at the outset of your medical residency. Among the significant shifts: what your peer relationships in residency look and feel like. Here’s a look at four ways relationships differ between medical school and residency.

A shared mission

In medical school, you all wanted to make it to the next level. But, for the most part, you were responsible for only yourself. That changes in residency.

“As medical students, we are oftentimes in this bubble,” said Nick Christian, MD, a second-year internal medicine resident at Dell Medical School at the University of Texas at Austin. “As residents, you get out of that and see the world as part of the workforce. That shifts what our goals are and what is meaningful to us. At least for me in my program, I’m not as obsessed about being better than the person next to me. I’m far more obsessed about my professional and personal development.”

Less face time

Students see their peers on a near-daily basis during medical school, particularly during the pre-clinical years. That changes in residency.

Ahmad Khan, MD—a second-year psychiatry resident at University of North Dakota (UND) School of Medicine and Health Sciences—says he only sees most of his peers during twice weekly lectures.

“There’s a difference in the quality of the time we spend together,” Dr. Khan said. “I was around classmates more in med school. In residency, we spend less time together. We hang out after our rotations and things like that, and when we do, we have fun. But it doesn’t happen often.”
More independence

During residency, you’re not seeing your peers often, and when it comes to your knowledge base, you may not look to the more senior residents for advice as frequently.

“When I was in med school in Pakistan, we used to ask everything from the senior [medical students],” Dr. Khan said. “What are the topics we need to study to prepare for the test? There were a bunch of questions like that. In residency, we still ask our [older residents] questions, but we rely on them less of the time.”

The stakes are higher

With increased responsibility comes an increase in pressure. One necessary outlet for that pressure is a network of peers who can offer support.

“In residency, the peer relationships are so important,” Dr. Khan said. “You have difficult conditions and you have conflicts with staff and attendings. But if you have good peer support, you can discuss your problems. I interviewed at 20 programs, and I knew people at UND. One of the reasons I ranked it high was because of a strong peer support network.”