

If you're feeling disappointed on Match Day, you are not alone

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As a medical student, there is no guarantee that things will work out according to your plan come Match Day. And when they do not, you may feel as though you're alone in your disappointment.

It is not unusual for medical students to feel some form of disappointment after the Match.

"If something feels off or feels wrong, it's really common. A lot of unexpected things can happen and no one really has control over the algorithm," said AMA member Laura Halpin, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatry fellow at the University of California, Los Angeles, Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Behavior.

"The disappointment is a real challenge. ... It's easy to feel you failed or did something wrong if you don't get your top choice."

When plan A doesn't come through

According to data on the 2020 Match compiled by the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP), 46% of seniors from U.S. allopathic medical schools got the top choice on their rank-order list while 71% wound up in their top three on Match Day.

Based on that math—which is typical of the breakdown on an annual basis—students are often advised to envision living and training at any of their top five choices prior to Match Day. But for some, it is difficult not to get fixated on No. 1.

As a medical student at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of medicine, Myphuong Phan, MD, MPH, had her heart set on returning to Houston, her hometown, for residency. But things did not go as planned.

Upon reading her Match letter, she "literally froze for 30 seconds—it was like I was not reading what I was reading," she said. "I didn't see 'Houston' and I was shocked. I found myself crying and it took a

few minutes to calm down and be OK.”

Dr. Phan, an AMA member, ended up at her No. 3 choice, the family medicine program at Dell Medical School at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). Instead of being a few minutes from family as she hoped, she’s a few hours away.

Yet she has found several positives with the structure of her current program. For instance, the program at UT was smaller than her top choices—taking about seven residents per year. She discovered that working with a smaller team of residents creates a solid support system.

“I’m challenged and I’m growing in ways that I’m happy with,” said Dr. Phan. “I do think that the opportunities I have here are different from what I would’ve had at my No. 1 program. I’m part of this brand-new medical school that is establishing itself as innovative, there [are] so many added bonuses with that.”

The wrong specialty

Dr. Halpin ended up in a program she wanted to go to for general surgery, her preferred specialty in her Match rankings. From the start, however, it just did not feel right.

“On Match Day, I looked around and saw happy people and didn’t feel that happy,” she said. “I didn’t understand what was off at the time. A few months into the program, I realized that it [general surgery] wasn’t the specialty choice that I wanted.”

She began to explore the possibility of leaving the specialty. For residents who take this step, Dr. Halpin cautions, you must read your employment contract at your program and with the NRMP. Anyone who matches through the NRMP is required to remain in the training program for 45 days after their contract takes effect. Failure to do so could prevent an applicant from being able to re-enter the Match.

Eventually, with help from her medical school advisers, Dr. Halpin identified psychiatry as her preferred specialty. She left her first residency program and re-entered the Match. The following spring, she wound up matching with her current program.

“My Match Day the second time around was me at work opening an e-mail,” she said. “I was super excited, but it wasn’t the same.... In the end, the place I’m at now is a perfect fit for what I want to do as far as specialty and career.”

Learn the five things you should know about switching residency programs.

For those who don't match

Typically, around 5% percent of U.S. allopathic medical school graduates experience the disappointment of not matching.

During Match Week, unmatched applicants and unfilled programs will work to match with one another through the National Resident Matching Program's existing Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program (SOAP). Four rounds of SOAP have been planned for 2021—that number is traditionally three. Given the uncertainties surrounding the Match this year, it remains to be seen how busy SOAP will be in 2021.

FREIDA™, the AMA Residency & Fellowship Database® (registration required), enables unmatched students to research residencies from more than 12,000 programs both during and following SOAP. Access is free, but extra benefits—such as a dashboard that helps users save, rank and keep notes on each program—are available to AMA members.

In addition, the AMA provides resources to help recent medical graduates obtain their medical licenses, study for licensure exams and support legislation to increase the number of graduate medical education positions.