

Virtual residency interviews: Tips to help M4s manage new stressor

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Applications are submitted, and in the coming weeks an unprecedented residency application cycle will begin one of its most atypical phases: virtual interviews.

For medical students, taking one of the key steps of residency selection from the physical world to the digital world could bring additional stress. Chantal Young, PhD, director of medical student wellness at the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California (USC), has done extensive research on medical student stressors. Having counseled students at USC—a member school of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium—Young offered this insight on how students can manage potential stress associated with virtual interviews.

Look at the positives

For the most part, both medical students and residencies would prefer to do interviews in person. Still, Young says, it's worth looking at the favorable aspects of virtual interviews.

“On the positive end, there is some relief about not having to travel for interviews and spend so much money,” Young said. “Students are happy to have more time for self-care and do feel like they are going in more rested to residency.”

For those budgeting for their applications, the new FREIDA™ Residency Calculator is a member-exclusive tool that assists medical students in planning ahead for residency application costs and interview expenses. It also can account for the change in interview expenses during the unique 2021 application cycle.

Learn more with the AMA about how much virtual residency interviews could save applicants.

Accept your new normal

Several aspects of medical education, including this year's Match process, have been disrupted by the pandemic—not just the interview process. Students have had to roll with the punches, as hard as that has been.

“There's a kind of radical acceptance of the situation,” Young said. “It's a term we use to mean that we are trying to accept the unacceptable and bring down our own suffering by not fighting how things are—but just accepting it, as hard as this is right now.”

“An increase in uncertainty is what everyone is dealing with. You're not at a disadvantage compared to other students. Not interviewing in person is one of the losses of COVID, and it's okay to grieve that you do not get to have the normal interview process. You are not alone, and there's nothing wrong with you for feeling insecure.”

Learn how residency programs will view applications during the 2021 application cycle.

Use the resources at your disposal

At USC, student affairs is setting up practice interviews for fourth-year medical students over Zoom. Most medical schools are offering similar resources to prep. If all else fails, Young recommends practicing with your fellow medical students. If you are getting overwhelmed by the anxiety you are feeling about interviews, ask for help.

“Students should ask themselves: Am I having the kind of anxiety—when I think about a Zoom interview—that I think will severely impact my performance?” Young said. “Am I worried that my anxiety will impair the impression I'm making? If the answer is yes, the move would be to reach out to your counseling or wellness office for help.”

Discover four tips to help 2021 residency applicants succeed with video interviews.

Know your limitations

Virtual interviews could indeed mean more interviews total or more of them in succession. The good news, Young said, is that the more virtual interviews you do, the more comfortable you are likely to get with doing them.

She advised residency applicants to be “super self-compassionate” given this unprecedented experience and to avoid pushing themselves too hard.

“I would encourage students to know their limits on any given day or week,” Young said. “Try to know when you are not going to be functional anymore and try to space interviews out as best you can.”

Applicants should keep in mind that the interviews they do Friday, at the end of a long week, “may not be as sharp as the ones you do on Monday morning.”

The AMA has curated a selection of resources to assist residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing