M4s should be prepared for these 3 residency interview questions

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Residency interviews are underway, meaning most applicants are deep into their interview preparation.

The matter many future residents are likely pondering is which questions they should be most prepared to answer. Rather than guessing which questions you will get asked, it helps to know the ones that are almost certain to be lobbed your way.

In an AMA-member exclusive event, residency program directors and resident physicians offered insight on the residency interview process. This included a few questions that those who have been on both ends of the interview table believe are almost certain to come up in one form or another during conversations between residency applicants and program directors. A recording of the event is available for AMA members—click to join or renew.

For the 2022–2023 cycle, the recommendation is that most interviews will be virtual. The lack of in-person interviews does present at least one silver lining: saving on residency interview travel costs. The FREIDA™ Residency Calculator is an AMA member-exclusive tool that helps medical students plan ahead for residency application costs and interview expenses. Learn how much you will save, and what should you expect to spend, on the rest of the application process.

Find out more about what not to do during your interactions with program directors.

Why are you here?

This is question No. 1 to be ready for. The answer isn’t to interview for a residency position. It should be specific to why you want to go into that specialty and, more important, what attracts you to that particular residency program.
“Be prepared to show why you want to go to my program,” said David Marzano, MD, director of the ob-gyn residency program at Michigan Medicine. “When we speak to applicants, we know why they want to go into ob-gyn, but why do you want to come to the University of Michigan?

“What we are trying to figure out is who is going to be happy here,” Dr. Marzano added. “This is a place you are going to be living for [at least four years]—and highly likely longer than that because there’s good data that show people stay close to where they train.”

Get tips to help fourth-year medical students manage virtual interviews.

Tell me about yourself

People are going to want to know about your background in a way that goes beyond your CV. You should have a concise story ready that presents your path and how it put you on a trajectory to your future in medicine.

“Tell your story in a chronological order,” said AMA member Liz Southworth, MD, a third-year ob-gyn resident at Michigan Medicine. “Think about someone listening to your story and how it makes sense to them. Highlight some big events—without regurgitating your CV. If there are three salient experiences you have had that you want to draw people’s attention to, it’s good to work those out beforehand.”

Check out this helpful list of the things you should know before residency interviews.

How have you handled adversity?

Ambiguity and failure are part of residency training. Showing how you persevere when things don’t go according to plan can offer interviewers valuable insight on your fit in their program.

“When I’ve asked you about a time that you have failed and how you got through it, I don’t care about the failure,” said Hilary Fairbrother, MD, an AMA member who is the vice chair of education in the emergency medicine department at the University of Texas at Houston.

“We have all failed,” she said. “We have all been through something really challenging and it has pushed us—it has tried us. This is a test of your grit and your resilience. I want to see what happens to you when you give a treatment and it doesn’t work, even if it was supposed to.”
It is important to mention some of the coping mechanisms that you use to maintain your well-being, said Ricardo Correa MD, program director for endocrinology and director for diversity in GME at University of Arizona College of Medicine-Phoenix.

“Programs are looking for residents that are resilient and that will be able to thrive during those years,” he said.