

How medical students aid each other in the quest for well-being

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Medical student wellness requires numerous resources. One of those assets is proving to be the students themselves.

With an understanding of that, medical schools are beginning to increase formal peer-to-peer wellness programs.

“We work very hard to understand the student perspective, as faculty,” said Lee Rosen, PhD, associate dean for students at the Larner College of Medicine at the University of Vermont (UVM). “But there's parts of that perspective that are best understood by people who have gone through it recently.”

Managing milestones with peer support

UVM has robust programming centered around peer-to-peer wellness. It includes a student-run wellness committee and two programs that help students with particular pain points in the early years of medical school—the transition to medical student and preparing for the Step 1 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE).

The Big Sibs program pairs each new first-year medical student with a second year. The second-year student meets with the first-year student to provide emotional and logistical guidance, especially around the transition to med school.

“What we do as professionals is learn to be people who take care of each other so that we can take care of the people,” Rosen said. “And that has to begin on day one of medical school.”

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The Step Sibs program matches a second-year medical student with a third or fourth year during dedicated study time for Step 1. The relationship, Rosen said, is specifically for emotional rather than academic support.

Isi R. Beach, is a UVM medical student in the midst of a research year. As a member of the wellness committee, she was instrumental in the development of the Step Sibs program and acted as a mentor to an M2 approaching her test date.

"We like the idea of the peer-to-peer mentor because faculty took the boards years ago, but that was before it was before it turned into this really high-pressure event," she said.

"It's helpful to have a student mentor because they're probably more up to date on the best advice and they're more approachable. It's a lot easier to have the cell phone number of fellow med student than it is to call up a faculty member. It's really helpful to have that on-demand sort of advice." Learn the 4 key elements of medical student well-being.

A lesson in compassion

UVM hopes to expand the peer-to-peer program to include a resident-student mentorship program around the Match, the key milestone in the later years of medical school.

The barriers to entry for the mentorship piece, Beach said, were low.

"As far as the time commitment, people used their sibling as much or as little as they wanted," she said. "For me it was kind of just checking in every week or every other week over text, and it really wasn't any strain on me."

Even if it is adding one more thing to the list for medical students, Rosen believes that the mentor-mentee relationship has value outside of the wellness arena.

“Students who take care of each other, who support each other to be successful, those are the kind of physicians that you want to have out in the world,” he said. “Those who create effective teams, who make the people around them better, that's what residency program directors are looking for.”