

PPD Assessment – Reflection

Question: Discuss medical student's physical and mental health based on the theme "The elephant I didn't see in my room". (Tutorial 3)

Medical student wellbeing, which encompasses both physical and mental health, is greatly shaped by the unique and challenging academic environment within which it resides(1). Part of this unique profile is the pervading stigmas surrounding poor mental health(2), and the impact this stigma has on medical student physical and mental health. My artwork explores the hidden world of a medical student's internal struggle upon embarking on the journey to become a doctor. Even more importantly, this artwork seeks to address, expose and correct the stigma of medical student mental health, that is, the uncomfortable 'elephant in the room'.

On a superficial level, I expound the causes of poor medical student mental health through a number of scattered vignettes on the right side of the artwork. On the top left, the medical student is adapting to a changing world where medicine is gradually consuming her 'normal' environment; trees take the form of excitatory neurons, her path transforms into the trachea and its turbulent air, and the grass beside her morphs into the ever-fluid phospholipid bilayer of a cell. Beneath this image, the medical student collapses under the pressure of her demanding coursework, which distances her from her family, as seen by the symbolism of the surgical scissors perforating her family portrait. Progressing onward, the medical student is overcome by the looming presence of her cold seniors in the clinical environment, meaningful relationships with non-medical friends are hurt, and she hesitates to open the door to seeking help. The combination of these factors is a major contributor to negative mental health faced by medical students (1, 3).

However, it is clear that the most salient feature of the artwork is the relationship between the medical student and her uncanny companion: the purple elephant. The elephant interferes with every aspect of the student's life, from study and interpersonal relationships to clinical practise. In short, the elephant is a visual metaphor for the student's poor mental health, and the cause of this is multifaceted and alluded to in the aforementioned vignettes. Furthermore, physical health is equally implicated here. The lack of space on the canvas devoted to exercise, healthy eating and fun activities with friends and families is a witness to the declining ability to maintain healthy habits in medical school(4). From my personal experience as a medical student, visits to the general practitioner are often one of the first commitments to be sacrificed for more time to study, hence the symbol of the elephant locking the door to 'help'.

I sought to address the idea of stigma surrounding medical student mental health through the subject's inability to maintain eye contact with the elephant in the right side of the image. According to Kengeter(2), stigma is the most potent cause for students not seeking help for their mental health problems. While medical students attempt to improve student wellbeing through new class structures (problem based learning, wellbeing sessions etc.)(4), resilience is significant on an intrapersonal level(5). This is defined by the medical student's recognition of the elephant in the room and her subsequent attempt to control it, as seen by the miniature elephant nestled within her hands. Donning the scrubs of a medical student, the subject is only able to thrive once she breaks down the barrier of stigma.

Mental health forms itself to be a giant elephant in the lives of medical students. Increased pressure to perform well, reduced time from family and social situations, and high expectations on oneself serve as large barriers to confront the elephant in the room. However, addressing this stigma is key for medical students in liberating themselves from the suffocating effects of stigma on mental and physical health.

References

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3. Fletcher I, Castle M, Scarpa A, Myers O, Lawrence E. An exploration of medical student attitudes towards disclosure of mental illness. *Medical Education Online*. 2020;25(1):1727713.
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