

Introduction of psychological skills laboratory in medical education

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ABSTRACT

Depression and anxiety are common psychological issues among university students, yet many of them hesitate to seek professional help due to stigma. Unfortunately, university curricula often lack self-help strategies to manage these challenges and provide timely support to those in need. To address this gap, we introduced the Psychological Skills Lab (PSL) component in the undergraduate medical curriculum, which emphasizes experiential learning to promote self-determination and autonomy in health promotion. The lab allows active interaction among students, lecturers, and peers through activities like presentations, peer reviews, in session practice, gratitude journals, group discussions, and role plays. PSL helps students develop skills, empathy, mindfulness, and self compassion through regular interactions. This innovative teaching approach raises mental health awareness and empowers students to assist others when required. Thus, by incorporating self-help measures into the curriculum, students are better equipped to manage their emotional well-being while supporting those around them.

KEY WORDS: Empathy, medical education, psychological skills laboratory

The increasing prevalence and severity of mental health difficulties among university students is a critical issue for universities and their wider communities. Grégoire *et al.*^[1] reported that mental health problems brought a profound influence on students' quality of life and had a negative impact on their academic performance leading to burnout and eventually dropping out from university. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of depression and suicidal thoughts of university students in Malaysia increased from 15.5% and 12.9% to 29.4% and 14%, respectively.^[2,3] There is a worrying correlation between the majority of university students and mental health issues. Even before the outbreak, the rate of Malaysian students suffering from mental health problems has doubled in less than a decade (10% in 2011 to 20% in 2016).^[4]

Nonetheless, it was discovered that the low rate of the utility of professional assistance could have worsened the issue. In the United States, only 21% of university students who experienced anxiety sought professional support.^[5] Over half were unaware of the presence of mental health treatments

and felt it had become more difficult to assess mental health care since the pandemic.^[5] In Malaysia, only 3.8% of university students had engaged with the university mental health support systems.^[6] However, little is known about the actions a university could take to effectively support mental well-being, especially incorporating the mental health elements in academic course design and teaching several strategies to maintain psychological well-being.^[7] Although some recognized the need for holistic training, the practical psychological skills of self-help had not been emphasized much in the medical curriculum.

It is important to employ a positive psychology strategy that offers novel ways to strengthen psychological resilience and promote mental health.^[8] A specific course at the university level that incorporates positive self-help measures to manage their own emotions while preparing these medical students to deliver interventions to people around them would be crucial.

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Psychological skill laboratory as a training tool

Psychological skill laboratory (PSL) is a teaching pedagogy proposed that medical students can recognize their emotional needs and act as therapists by providing brief psychological interventions to their patients before one could receive any formal psychological intervention. It emphasizes the importance of experiential learning given that self-determination and autonomy are key elements to promote psychological well-being while cultivating humanistic values.

Traditional medical pedagogy encourages objectivity, standardization, and emotional detachment to maintain a professional distance from patients, to make objective clinical decisions, and to regard patients as equally deserving of care.^[9] However, traditional pedagogy tends to minimize the value of subjectivity, the function of emotions, and the therapeutic potential of relationship and solidarity.^[10] This strong emotional suppression and deficiency in the training in engaging emotions can potentially lead to exhaustion and burnout.

PSL emphasized a more holistic human capacity with the element of human curiosity as a precondition that facilitates medical students' capability to make an effort to listen to others' unique experiences with their physical illness and delicately express this understanding to them.^[9] With the skills learnt and in-session practice, it promotes students' ability to self-reflection, awareness, interpretation of emotional responses of self and others, empathy, and the development of insight and sensitivity to be moved and acts accordingly to their own and others' emotional or physiological needs. The ability to observe emotions in others, feel, and respond to those emotions is particularly important to healthcare workers and is considered as one of the key clinical skills in medical education. The empathetic relationship develops during the process, and quality of care reinforces therapeutic results. However, there are still many difficulties in regard to implementing these values and empathy in clinical practice as a relatively high percentage of health professionals (70%) struggled to develop empathy in their service.^[9,10] Research outcomes suggest that the lack of self-awareness and a lack of appropriate training as well as emotional dysregulation are among the factors that contribute to a low level of empathy.^[11] Thus, the objective of this study is to explore the perspectives of medical students on the introduction of psychological skills into the medical curriculum.

Materials and Method

Study design and population

We collected the students' feedbacks in practicing PSL, and a preliminary thematic analysis was applied. There were 301 medical students aged 22–23 years old with 71% of females (29% male) included in this brief report.

PSL

The PSL consists of six sessions (2 h per session)

- (i) Healthy lifestyles and self-care;
- (ii) Mindfulness and relaxation techniques;
- (iii) Introduction to cognitive behavioral therapy;

- (iv) Active listening and communication skills and psychological first aid;
- (v) Behavioral analysis and problem-solving techniques;
- (vi) Values, goal setting, and self-compassion.

Each session includes activities such as role-plays, small group discussion and reflection, therapeutic exercises, and case-based content to comprehensively incorporate empathy and compassion training into medical education. Handouts, audio, and video clips were also uploaded to eLeap (an online platform for student learning). For details, please refer to the supplementary document.

Throughout the six sessions, students were encouraged to make their own gratitude journal as a takeaway activity to promote self-reflection, to cultivate appreciation, and to build greater resiliency. This exercise was continued for six weeks with few feedback and sharing sessions throughout the six weeks. The purpose of this feedback was to clarify ambiguities, to motivate, and to change their perspectives to a more compassionate manner that they are kinder to themselves and others.

Results

In general, we received positive feedbacks from the students for having these sessions. Some expressed that they managed to reflect on themselves and experienced self-discovery through the activities, while others felt having free therapeutic sessions in facing emotional turmoil and it was very healing.

“Very enlightening and eye-opening. I learned a lot of things, discovered a lot about myself and other people. These skills can be applied even if I don't go into psychiatry.”

“Overall, the psl were interesting, fun and free therapy for me. After each session, I am able to review back my life and start doing better.”

“I found this session very meaningful because it help(s) me when I was in grief and suffering pain.”

The interactive practical sessions also empowered the students to learn to be more empathetic toward patients and be kind to own self.

“The skill labs were very helpful in teaching the important basic skills a doctor should have when they are treating their patients.”

“PSL is useful in terms of helping me to be more aware and mindful including teaching ways to handle a patient. I find myself applying the things taught during PSL sessions during my daily life and I felt calmer.”

This PSL also motivated students to be more mindful and willing to make small changes in their life. Students' feedback is that they are equipped with skills to be their own therapist to self-help. Students also commented that they noticed and appreciated more minor things that they ignored previously.