CULTIVATING COMPASSION: BUILDING RESILIENCE IN MEDICAL STUDENTS

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Context
Stress and distress among health care professions students is not uncommon. In fact, medical students have been found to have worse mental health, more stress and more burnout than the general population. The situation in Asia may be more profound, given the intense pressure on students to succeed and the relative immaturity of students due to admission to medical school as undergraduates when they begin to encounter ill patients in the clinical environment. While systemic change is needed, efforts can be also be directed towards helping students build resilience to better thrive in the current environment. The idea of compassion, which may be understood as ‘a sensitivity to suffering in ourselves and others with a desire to alleviate and prevent it’, has been a promising framework for intervention. We share our experience in implementing a programme within the medical school curriculum to help students recognize distress and to build resilience through self-awareness and self-compassion.

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<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
<td>In Pursuit of Balance: Mindfulness, mindful practice and well-being in medical school (3 hours)</td>
<td>Recognizing our emotions and appropriate responses (2.5 hours)</td>
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<td><strong>Learning activities</strong></td>
<td>Sitting meditation</td>
<td>Personal reflection</td>
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<td>Body movements – simple yoga exercises</td>
<td>Walking meditation</td>
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<td>Mindful walking</td>
<td>Befriending meditation</td>
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<td>Eating meditation</td>
<td>One follow up individual home practice (guided meditation recording available on moodle)</td>
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Observations
As a compulsory element in the curriculum all students in every cohort since 2012 have participated in these workshops, with each cohort comprised of 210-235 medical students. Their words through semi-structured written reflections, and through informal small group presentations of their body-mapping artwork, have indicated that students can articulate, appreciate and use approaches learned in the workshops to deal with difficult emotions in a self-compassionate way. Their evaluations of the workshop over 3 academic years (2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18) have been overwhelmingly positive with the vast majority finding them effective (mean score ranged 3.13 – 3.53 on 4-point Likert scale) and relevant to their development as a doctor (ranged 3.12 – 3.38).

Conclusion
Our multimodal, longitudinal compassion training programme helps provide strategies for medical students to handle difficult emotions in day to day life as well as in the clinical setting and is valued by students.

References

Acknowledgements
We would like to acknowledge the late Professor LC Chan for his compassion and vision, Miss Joyce Tsang for her design assistance, and our students for keeping an open and receptive mind.

“I don’t like an emotional me. But now I began to acknowledge the fact that, emotions are inevitable, and they are beautiful in a sense that they make us human.”

“I learn to accept them as they come instead of letting it gain control over my thoughts, speech and actions.”

Extracted quotes from post-workshop reflection note