

Keeping CALM and other Jedi mind tricks: A psychiatrist's perspective on student stress and wellbeing

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Jenny*, a 4th year medical student doing her psychiatry rotation, emailed me asking if I had some time to talk to her urgently. *As the psychiatry coordinator at the Auckland School of Medicine, I try to respond as soon as possible to questions regarding case histories and other mundane course issues.* I met her in my office and in my usual jolly way asked her what part of the course she was having trouble with. She asked me to shut the door. *Hmmm, not usually a good sign.* She openly wept and I could not understand a word she was saying. *I did not think psychiatry was that bad!* She talked about low mood, tearfulness, passive thoughts of death and an inability to experience pleasure for the past couple of months. In addition, her boyfriend was being a jerk and they were constantly fighting. She started to restrict her eating again with a consequential drop in her BMI. She wanted to quit medicine, but she was worried about what her parents and classmates would think. Her world was crumbling in.

I do not need to talk about the details of how much stress medical students experience. Medical school is very demanding and not for the weak in constitution. The workload is intense, the examinations are hard and the expectations are high, not to mention the piling debts. In addition, the personality type of many medical students has a big dollop of perfectionism and hyper-competitiveness. Overall, it is a bad recipe for burn out and stress.

I have my annual share of students getting extremely disappointed with a 'Pass' because they were gunning for 'Distinction'. That is despite telling them a zillion times that the chances of someone asking them in a job interview what mark they got in the Psychiatry OSCE are close to zero.

Our own recently analysed data on rates of anxiety, depression and sleep symptoms among third year medical students is horrific to read. Diagnoses of depression and anxiety (22% and 35%) are twice that of the national prevalence for a similar age group. About fifty percent of third year medical students have significant sleep symptoms. Twenty percent have a diagnosable problem with alcohol.

It is not all bad news though. I personally know many medical students who are happy, well-balanced and still get good marks. From an anecdotal perspective (definitely not evidence-based), these happy and successful students have three things.

Firstly, they have a life outside of medicine. Some are very active in sports, music, their religious group or something they are passionate about. A few

prioritise their family life. Once you have a baby, the 'Distinction' in the OSCE loses its shimmer.

Secondly, they have perspective. They can see the landscape of life. There will always be disappointments and failures. If you have not failed an exam through your primary and secondary schooling, there's a big possibility you will fail at least one in medicine. I failed one of the biggest examinations for future shrinks whilst I was a registrar in the US. I passed it on the second attempt. I still think I am a pretty good psychiatrist (unless I am clearly delusional).

Thirdly, they have resilience. They possess certain personality characteristics that enable them to bounce back when there are stressors.

How does one develop resilience?

There is a recent explosion of research on what makes certain people truly and genuinely happy. This is the science of positive psychology. We cannot do much about our genetic predisposition for happiness or unhappiness. We can only manipulate our environment to a limited degree. The exciting thing is we can do a lot to train our minds to become fit and resilient. If we can train our bodies to be fit and buff, of course we can train our minds!

We developed the CALM website (www.calm.auckland.ac.nz) to assist medical students in learning how to keep their minds healthy and fit. Some of the recommendations are dead easy, while some require regular practice for at least eight weeks.

Writing a regular diary detailing things you can be grateful for is always a favourite. It enhances the mind's ability to look ALSO at the good things happening in our lives. I average about five entries every night. So over the past two years of writing, I have accumulated more than 3650 things I can be thankful for.

Enhancing positive emotions like compassion and forgiveness also increases resilience. You become more understanding when people annoy you. When you really examine the situation, people generally do not deliberately annoy you. It is how we perceive the situation that causes the annoyance in us.

One of the sure-fire techniques to boost resilience is developing mindfulness. Living in the moment, not getting trapped by ruminations about the future, without judging, appreciating life as it goes by, rolling with the punches with a subtle smile; it is a 3000 year old practice that you can learn on your own by visiting our website. Better yet, join a mindfulness meditation class. I consider this the anabolic steroid for resilience.

Jenny used our website. Of course I have to recommend our website! LOL! She also engaged with a very helpful counsellor from student health. She did not need antidepressants. Her boyfriend still annoys her once in a while (boys do that!) but they are still together. She finished her 4th year but decided to take a year off to travel and do volunteer work in India. I supported her in her decision, knowing that she will be a better doctor when she comes back.

*Jenny is a composite character of a few medical students

The CALM (Computer Assisted Learning for the Mind) website was developed by Dr Fernando with GP Dr Fiona Moir and psychiatrist Dr Shailesh Kumar, an expert on burn out, with assistance from the Faculty of Medical and Health Science Learning Technology Unit and the University of Auckland's Centre for Academic Development.

The CALM website focuses on positive psychology, the science of looking at what makes people truly happy. Students are able to download audio files giving specific techniques to manage three sources of long lasting happiness – mental resilience, healthy relationships and finding meaning in life. The website, initially offered to students in the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, is publicly available at www.calm.auckland.ac.nz.