

***Strengthening Resilience Against Vicarious Trauma:
A Counselor-Developed Training Program for Physician Residents***

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Abstract

The increasing prevalence of vicarious trauma among physician residents in Graduate Medical Education (GME) programs poses significant challenges to both individual well-being and patient care quality (Gundacker et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2021). This paper introduces a novel training program, Support-U Training Program (SUTP), crafted by counselors within these programs to enhance resilience against such traumas. Utilizing innovative strategies, SUTP focuses on cultivating long-term coping mechanisms through peer support networks and resilience-building techniques. The program not only addresses immediate stressors but also integrates continuous professional development and mental health maintenance, thus fostering a culture of self-care and empathy among healthcare providers. The pilot implementation of SUTP shows promising results in improving communication and support capabilities among participants, with notable advancements in managing stress and emotional exhaustion that often precede burnout. This paper discusses the program's development, its theoretical underpinnings, and the positive impacts observed during its pilot phase, alongside implications for future practice and research in GME environments.

Keywords: Vicarious Trauma, Resilience, Interprofessional Collaboration, Peer Support

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Introduction

In the demanding field of healthcare, the exposure of physician residents to vicarious trauma is a growing concern that impacts both individual well-being and the quality of patient care (Jacob & Lambert, 2021). Graduate Medical Education (GME) programs play a pivotal role in training new healthcare professionals, but they also bring them face-to-face with the emotional and psychological challenges inherent in patient care (Ravi et al., 2021). Recognizing the vital need for robust support systems, counselors within these programs have developed innovative strategies to foster resilience and support amongst their ranks. These strategies not only focus on addressing immediate stressors but also emphasize long-term mental health maintenance, helping physician residents build sustainable coping mechanisms throughout their careers. By integrating peer support networks into GME programs, counselors can cultivate a culture of self-care and empathy that ultimately benefits both healthcare providers and the patients they serve.

Literature Review

Recent literature underscores the significant psychological distress that can arise from vicarious trauma and the subsequent need for effective support systems within healthcare institutions (Gundacker et al., 2021; Jacob & Lambert, 2021; Seo et al., 2021). It has been suggested that medical errors and unexpected patient outcomes can lead to severe emotional and physical distress among physicians, often causing them to second-guess their clinical competence and, in some cases, even leading to the abandonment of their positions (Agarwal, Brooks, & Greenberg, 2020). Such findings have prompted the development of targeted interventions like the SUTP, designed to address these vulnerabilities by leveraging the relationship-building expertise of counselors.

Building on the initial identification of vicarious trauma's effects, further research points to the essential role of continuous training programs in cultivating emotional resilience within the healthcare sector (Cordova, Gimmler & Osterberg, 2020). Studies emphasize the necessity of developing multifaceted approaches that address both the cognitive and emotional competencies required to handle the pressures of medical practice effectively. For instance, Goldhagen and colleagues (2015) explored the impact of mindfulness and communication training integrated into residency programs, which significantly reduced symptoms of stress and burnout among participants. These results affirm the value of implementing comprehensive educational strategies that include both personal wellness practices and professional skill development (Goldhagen et al., 2023). Furthermore, implementing empathy curriculum for physician resident training has shown promising outcomes in enhancing self-awareness, increasing emotional intelligence among healthcare providers, and augmenting crucial skills for mitigating the effects of vicarious trauma (Quinn et al., 2020).

Moreover, community-based support training within medical institutions has also gained recent attention. Lepisto (2021) identified six critical themes that comprised a successful peer support training program: knowledge of communication techniques, approach tactics, understanding hospital resources, commitment to helping colleagues, recognizing the importance of burnout, and fostering a better understanding of oneself. This comprehensive focus not only equips physician residents with the necessary tools to address vicarious trauma effectively but also cultivates a supportive network that enhances collective resilience. By embedding these educational and emotional support frameworks within their daily practices, healthcare

professionals can significantly mitigate the impacts of burnout and improve overall job satisfaction.

Training Program Development

The SUTP is designed based on robust literature that highlights the critical need for trauma resilience in healthcare settings, particularly among physician residents. The program's objective is to fortify trauma resilience by training physicians to provide vital peer support, addressing the issue of vicarious trauma experienced by healthcare professionals. By focusing on essential communication skills such as empathy, active listening, and open-ended questioning, SUTP facilitates the development of a robust peer support network.

This initiative not only leverages these key communicative techniques but also introduces a structured method for recognizing and addressing vicarious trauma among peers. It empowers participants to maintain professional boundaries while effectively supporting their colleagues, thereby preventing the accumulation of stress and emotional exhaustion that often leads to burnout. The importance of peer support is underscored by the prevalence of burnout and the unique vulnerabilities of physicians, such as the ingrained culture of perfectionism, self-sacrifice, and the stigmatization of seeking help.

The pilot phase of the program has shown promising results that come from our survey and a focus group with the chief residents of each program. The three programs that participated included Internal Medicine, Emergency Medicine and Family Medicine. From these programs, 67 residents participated in the survey and 6 prepared in the focus group. The findings in the next section highlight the effectiveness of the training in improving not only individual resilience but also in fostering a supportive community atmosphere.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The success of the SUTP program highlights the critical need for dynamic adaptation in training methods to keep pace with the rapidly changing healthcare environment. As technology and medical practices evolve, so too must the educational programs that support the emotional and professional growth of healthcare providers. It is imperative that future versions of such training programs incorporate advanced technological tools such as virtual reality simulations and AI-driven analytics to enhance learning experiences and provide real-time feedback. These technological integrations could further personalize learning paths, enabling residents to navigate complex emotional situations with greater competence and confidence.

The emphasis on community and collaboration within the SUTP program sheds light on the importance of fostering a culture of openness and mutual support among healthcare professionals. Future research should aim to conduct longitudinal studies to validate the long-term benefits of the SUTP approach. Moreover, it is essential to continue refining these interventions to ensure they are adapted to the evolving needs of healthcare professionals and the patients they serve.

Results

The SUTP has shown considerable success in enhancing the knowledge and skills of physician residents regarding vicarious trauma, peer support, and communication, as demonstrated by the results of the evaluation surveys conducted following the training sessions. The survey

data obtained from participants who underwent the SUTP paint a clear picture of its impact on the physician residents' competencies in key areas. The training yielded a substantial impact on the respondents' awareness of vicarious trauma, with an impressive 85% indicating a marked increase in their understanding as a direct result of the program. This increase in awareness demonstrates how this training equips them to better recognize and manage the effects of this occupational hazard which is critical in the healthcare environment. This improvement in awareness is essential for cultivating a resilient workforce capable of providing high-quality patient care while maintaining their own mental well-being.

In addition to vicarious trauma, the survey responses indicated that 62% of the participants strongly felt that their ability to provide peer support to other residents was enhanced. Similarly, a comparable figure of 63% strongly agreed that their listening and communication skills were bolstered. These skills are the cornerstone of effective teamwork and peer support within the high-stress environment of medical residencies. The substantial increase in knowledge and confidence in these areas is indicative of the program's success in not only enhancing individual capabilities but also in strengthening the communal support network among residents, which is vital for mitigating the challenges associated with vicarious trauma in the medical field.

Incorporating feedback from the focus group with chief residents across Internal Medicine, Family Medicine, and Emergency Medicine, further supports the positive outcomes observed with the SUTP. The chief residents confirmed the application of communication skills learned through the program, indicating a high frequency of use, with 3-4 instances per week where these skills were utilized to provide support to their peers. The chief residents provided compelling testimony on how the SUTP skills have been crucial in their role. They detailed how the training facilitated meaningful conversations with co-residents, both during challenging patient encounters and in managing daily stresses like fatigue and scheduling difficulties. This empowerment has enabled them to provide support without taking on their peers' stress, a key factor in maintaining their own well-being.

A significant benefit noted from the training was an increase in mindfulness, particularly in recognizing that personal issues can often underlie professional challenges. This awareness has proven valuable in addressing professionalism cases within the residency program. Additionally, the training has been commended for encouraging open communication, normalizing the discussion of stress, and day-to-day tasks, underscoring that sometimes acknowledgment of shared experiences is as crucial as finding solutions. These qualitative insights from the focus group reinforce the quantitative data, illustrating that the SUTP has not only provided the residents with knowledge and skills but also influenced behavioral changes that have a positive impact on their professional experiences. Residents now feel better prepared to engage with peers in a supportive capacity, thereby contributing to a more resilient work environment.

Conclusion: Implications for the Future

In conclusion, the development and implementation of the SUTP represent a significant step forward in addressing the challenges of vicarious trauma among physician residents. Through a comprehensive approach that integrates peer support, communication skills, and mindfulness techniques, the SUTP has demonstrated tangible benefits in enhancing individual resilience and fostering a supportive community within healthcare institutions. The success of the SUTP, as evidenced by survey data and feedback from chief residents, underscores the critical role of

ongoing training programs in equipping healthcare professionals with the tools they need to navigate the emotional demands of their profession. By increasing awareness of vicarious trauma, improving peer support capabilities, and enhancing communication skills, the program contributes to a more resilient workforce capable of delivering high-quality patient care while safeguarding their own well-being.

Looking ahead, the implications for practice and future research are substantial. As healthcare environments continue to evolve, training programs like the SUTP must adapt to incorporate advanced technological tools and personalized learning experiences. Longitudinal studies are needed to validate the long-term benefits of these interventions and ensure they remain relevant to the changing needs of healthcare professionals and patients alike.

Ultimately, the SUTP serves as a beacon of progress in strengthening resilience against vicarious trauma, highlighting the importance of proactive support systems and ongoing professional development in the healthcare sector.

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