

# Study explores med student mental-health peer support

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Results from a recent workshop study by Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry undergraduate students focusing on addressing mental health and wellness among medical students was recently published in the journal Medical Education. Credit: Paul Mayne // Western News file photo

A group of Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry students are emphasizing the value of peer support in promoting mental health and wellness among their ranks with an initiative they hope will change the

way medical students help each other.

"Medical students, like other health-care professionals, face a disproportionate rate of mental illness relative to the [general population](#)," said Alysha Ahmed, Medicine Class of 2020, noting as many as one-third of medical students experience some form of depression. "This led to the idea that we should try to improve this situation. One way we could do this was to better equip our peers to help each other."

Ahmed knew there was interest among students in having more practical training on how to support peers experiencing mental illness or extreme stress. She had helped facilitate a suicide intervention workshop for medical students in 2017.

Along with fellow Medicine Class of 2020 students Trystan Nault, Julian Rizos and Karishma Taneja, and Medicine Class of 2021 students Jordan Berry and Rosie Javinsky, Ahmed partnered with local Canadian Mental Health Association experts to develop and deliver a peer-support workshop to 27 [medical students](#).

The one-day workshop focused on the ability to recognize peers in need of support, initiate a conversation, support them in creating a mental-health plan of action, practise self-care and set personal boundaries.

"Like many, I've grown up with family members and friends managing [mental illness](#)," Rizos said. "Throughout medical school, I found a surprising amount of my peers also dealing with similar challenges. This piqued my interest and concerned me; I wanted to be a part of the solution."

The students conducted three surveys as part of the initiative—a pre-workshop survey and two post-workshop surveys (immediately after and at six months).

The results showed that students grew in awareness of peers who may need support and were more likely to approach them with confidence in an educational or health-care settings. Participants also left the workshop with a greater knowledge of mental-health resources both on campus and in the [local community](#).

Their findings, Peer support: A medical [student](#)-driven [mental health](#) workshop, were recently published in the academic journal *Medical Education*.

The Western students presented their findings at the Ontario Student Medical Education Research Conference in 2019. They were awarded the Canadian Federation of Medical Students National Impact Award for the "translatable and scalable nature of this initiative and its potential for implementation in other schools going forward."

The group was also invited to present at the Canadian Conference on Physician Health in Newfoundland.

Ahmed plans to continue to run [workshop](#) on an annual basis and ultimately expand it to include students at other medical schools across the country.

"Ultimately, our goal would be to have enough med students trained so there is a positive 'spill-over' effect in our tight-knit community and most people feel they have a supportive peer in their life to turn to," Ahmed said.

**More information:** Alysha-Karima Ahmed et al. Peer support: A medical student-driven mental health workshop, *Medical Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/medu.14125](https://doi.org/10.1111/medu.14125)

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