

Mental Health of PA Students

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INTRODUCTION: Evidence has shown that the prevalence of some mental health disorders is higher among students enrolled in medical school. There is a concern that this may be true for physician assistant (PA) students as well, but less data exists. High levels of stress leading to burnout among students is associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and overall poor quality of life.

PURPOSE: This research aims to evaluate the prevalence of depression and anxiety in PA students.

METHODS: A cross sectional (survey) was distributed to PA students using an anonymous Qualtrics link. The survey link was sent to the program director for all accredited PA programs in the US so that it could be distributed to their students, and additional participants were recruited through social media and local advertisement. Within the survey, the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) screening tools were utilized to evaluate for the symptoms of generalized anxiety and depressive disorders.

RESULTS: Of the study participants, 15.8% identified as male, 83.2% identified as female and 0.6% identified as non-binary. There were 789 students who completed the PHQ-9 and of those 63% (n=497) had scores that indicate mild to severe levels of depression. There were 782 students who completed the GAD-7 and of those 67% (n=520) had scores that indicate mild to severe levels of anxiety. Additionally, 24.2% (195/804) of students report being diagnosed with a mental health disorder since starting their PA program. The influence of COVID-19 was also assessed in our survey, and 70.7% of participants affirmed the pandemic has impacted their mental health.

CONCLUSION: The prevalence of anxiety and depression among the PA student population is higher than the general population. Given the rate of depression and anxiety and the number of new diagnoses during the program, more research is needed to better understand what factors may be contributing to this decline in mental health. Further research could allow for implementation of targeted solutions to promote the mental well-being of PA students.