

The S.T.A.R. (Support, Tracking, And Referral) Program: A Scalable Wellness Intervention for Improving Collaborative Support for Resident Physicians

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Background and Hypothesis:

Medical trainees face rising rates of burnout, depression, and psychological distress. Peer support groups have shown promise as an intervention but remain underexplored in the clinical learning environment (CLE). A pilot study among the Emergency Medicine (EM) residency demonstrated that 96% of participants (n=85) reported improved well-being after resident-led peer support sessions, particularly benefiting those experiencing burnout. Building on this success, the S.T.A.R. (Support, Tracking, And Referral) Program was developed and piloted across 10 residency programs, yielding encouraging results. This led to a GME-supported, grant-funded expansion of the program to all residency programs at Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM), encompassing 1,142 residents. We hypothesize that participation in peer support groups will lead to measurable improvements in resident wellness over a two-year period.

Project Methods:

This prospective, longitudinal cohort study uses a two-arm waitlist randomized controlled trial design involving 1,146 residents across 42 programs. Participants are randomized into immediate or delayed intervention groups. All residents complete baseline surveys via personalized dashboards before the intervention, which includes a one-hour didactic session followed by monthly peer support meetings. Data collection includes program engagement metrics, pre/post-intervention surveys, and three annual well-being assessments using validated tools measuring anxiety, depression, burnout, and loneliness.

Results:

All 42 residency programs have enrolled, with 21 scheduled for immediate intervention. Early implementation shows strong engagement: 51% of 351 residents completed baseline surveys during GME orientation. In the first intervention session (n=40 pediatric residents), 67.5% completed pre-session and 25% completed post-session surveys.

Conclusion:

The S.T.A.R. Program offers a scalable, evidence-based peer support model to address the urgent mental health needs of medical trainees. By equipping residents with the language and skills to support one another, the program fosters a culture of wellness and has the potential to reduce stigma and burnout across medical institutions.