


# Personal-professional Development Program Fosters Resilience During COVID-Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

**PROBLEM:** Epidemiological data throughout the academic world show an upswing in mental health concerns among students, even more significant during the ongoing COVID-pandemic. Many universities have recognized these problems and started counseling programs. However, currently reported stress levels and mental health problems at many universities remain substantial.

**APPROACH:** Our medical faculty features an evidence informed longitudinal program on personal-professional development (LPPD) integrated into the core curriculum to strengthen wellbeing and support the student as a whole.

**OUTCOMES:** With our LPPD program we show that it is possible to successfully enable personal-professional development and well-being, especially in unexpected times when resilience is needed. The safe learning environment the teacher-coaches created has proven to be an important condition in this regard.

**NEXT STEPS:** The LPPD program will be further evaluated and both results and program materials will be shared with the academic community through web-pages, online material and research papers.

**KEYWORDS:** professionalism, education, medical, undergraduate, happiness, curriculum

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## Problem

Epidemiological data throughout the academic world show an upswing in mental health concerns among students, even more significant during the ongoing COVID-pandemic.<sup>1,2</sup> In recent years, many universities have recognized these problems regarding students' personal development and well-being and invested in mental health services, student counseling and well-being programs.<sup>3–5</sup> However, currently reported stress levels and mental health problems remain substantial.<sup>1,4,6,7</sup> This might be due to the intent of these initiatives. Most programs focus on counseling and support during stress and only partly on maintaining wellbeing. In addition, programs are typically organized outside core curricula, are often reactive and problem-solving in nature, while proactive, prevention and guidance are much more limited, overlooking students experiencing uncomplicated academic and personal development.<sup>8–11</sup> This failure to reach the majority of students threatens to compromise them of training to acquire the skills that have been shown to be of vital importance for a successful professional and personal life.<sup>12,13</sup> In the past few months several authors made moving pleas to focus on developing the whole student and to change university culture in this regard.<sup>2,6</sup> Our medical

faculty several years ago recognized the major wellbeing challenges among students and young graduates. For the same reason our medical faculty integrates a longitudinal personal-professional development program in our medical curricula since 2015. Our investments in this program are paying off, especially during these challenging times. In this paper we would like to share the design principles and our experiences.

## Approach

In contrast to the majority of academic studies, personal development is part of most medical undergraduate curricula, albeit mostly short and with a low intensity.<sup>14,15</sup> Our medical faculty features an evidence informed longitudinal program on personal-professional development (LPPD) integrated into the core curriculum. We created this program building on the paradigm that in order to sustainably take care of others, health professionals should take care of their own well-being first. Content as well as design of LPPD are based on principles of self-determination theory, in particular the active, collaborative and self-directed development into resilient and life-long learning professionals.<sup>16</sup>



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In this mandatory program themes such as self-reflection, study-life balance, time management, goal-setting, critical thinking, collaboration, professional attitude, (dis)stress and resilience are covered in lectures, study assignments and individual and group coaching sessions.<sup>17,18</sup> The program is organized in groups of 8 students and 1 teacher-coach and covers the entirety of our 6-year undergraduate curriculum. All 2000 students are enrolled into the program.<sup>17</sup> In line with the self-determination theory and life-long learning principles, our teacher-coaches and other teaching staff attended an obligatory training dedicated to coaching skills, self-reflection on well-being and role model teaching and learning.<sup>19</sup> Funding for this program was provided by a portion of the educational budget of our medical faculty. For a program overview see Table 1.

### COVID-Challenges

The COVID-pandemic places great pressure on our students and our faculty. Many teachers work on COVID-departments of hospitals and outpatient clinics. Our students study largely online with severely limited academic and social contacts. This crisis is, in a way, the ultimate test of our personal-professional program. A key factor in changing university culture towards developing the whole student is university culture itself. Faculty members are in the unique position of functioning as role models and demonstrating to students the importance of well-being and life balance as an integral part of their professional standards.<sup>20</sup> Currently, faculty members themselves face unprecedented challenges with regard to their

well-being, being pressured to keep living up to standards of delivering excellent education and research output, while also working as a physician. These challenges make it hard to preserve a healthy standard of well-being and life balance, let alone be a role model who is able to show vulnerability and insecurity while remaining professional.<sup>21</sup>

### Outcomes

Both students and coaches appreciate the LPPD program and the small group sessions (students 88%, coaches 95%). The majority of the students (70%) feel empowered in their personal-professional development. With regard to fostering wellbeing it was an eye-opener for all students (100%) to discover that they impose much stress upon themselves. The safety of the small groups to discuss topics such as perfectionism and sensitivity to social media pressure stimulated this.

### COVID

Our teacher-coaches were able to keep in touch with their small student groups during the current COVID-pandemic, allowing them to provide support when necessary. We could build upon their established relationship and stimulate students to use the current times to develop resilience in the face of uncertainty. To further support our students coping with the challenges they discussed with their teacher-coaches and in peer-groups, we provided students with short web-lectures regarding specific COVID-related topics like ‘staying resilient under pressure’ and ‘how to keep motivated’.<sup>22</sup> We noticed that students appreciated this. Students made a short videoclip thanking our staff for the continuous support and ongoing education, while being pressured themselves.<sup>23</sup>

**Table 1.** Longitudinal personal-professional development program.

YEAR PROGRAM	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 individual coaching sessions 30 minutes each</li> <li>• 8 group sessions, 2 hours               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 30–60 minutes: group coaching</li> <li>• 30–60 minutes educational content on personal-professional development</li> <li>• 30–60 minutes focus on a well-being topic</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Self-study and practical assignments</li> </ul>	
Personal-Professional development	Wellbeing and vitality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic skills               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-reflection, feedback, collaboration, goal-setting, professional responsibilities</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Critical thinking, life-long learning</li> <li>• Study/career orientation, professional attitude               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health care developments</li> <li>• Current affairs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Personal-Professional balance               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skill-training in the wellbeing and vitality track→</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crafting well-being and resilience               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time management</li> <li>• Motivation and strategies</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Leadership and pro-activity</li> <li>• Happiness and misconceptions</li> <li>• Metacognitive skills</li> <li>• Vitality               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy management: work versus rest</li> <li>• Healthy eating and guilty pleasures</li> <li>• Movement and exercising</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Next Steps

The efforts of our medical faculty did not stay unnoticed and our entire university is now using the materials we developed and initiating a university-wide plan to increase student well-being. Our program materials will be expanded to other medical faculties as well. The program is currently being evaluated and fine-tuned. We envision continuing our program in postgraduate education for physicians.

Our society will continue to change rapidly in almost every aspect and the demands on academic graduates in both the personal and professional field are challenging and subject to the same rapid change. Several recent papers depicted a somber picture of universities on the lack of support on the level of well-being.<sup>2,6</sup> With our faculty program we show that it is possible to successfully change faculty culture and enable personal-professional development and well-being, especially in times when resilience is needed. We hope to complement the somber picture with a positive and nuanced view on possibilities for universities. We would therefore like to invite other faculties and universities to a broader, integrated scope on wellbeing.

## Ethical Approval

Not applicable, because this article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects.

## Informed Consent

Not applicable, because this article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects.

## Trial Registration

Not applicable, because this article does not contain any clinical trials.

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