

9-28-2018

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Jessie Medina

Elizabeth Lawrence

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## Recommended Citation

Medina, Jessie and Elizabeth Lawrence. "Mental Health in Medical School: Students Share Their Stories." (2018).  
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# Mental Health in Medical School: Students Share Their Stories

Jessie Medina, Elizabeth Lawrence MD  
The University of New Mexico School of Medicine

## INTRODUCTION

This project was inspired by the suicide of a PGY II Internal Medicine resident.

Medical students, residents, and physicians are reluctant to disclose or seek help for their own mental health concerns. Physicians and trainees suffer in silence because of the fear of being stigmatized, concerns about medical licensing and credentialing, and the challenges of accessing confidential care.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of our colleagues' suicide, we were motivated to provide a forum for students to discuss their personal struggles with mental illness. Although matriculating medical students are less depressed, less burned out, and have higher quality of life scores than their age-matched peers, they are more depressed and burned out than their age-matched peers by the time of graduation.<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of depression in medical students is 27.2%.<sup>3</sup>

Our hope was to empower students to share their stories, feel less alone in their struggles, and seek the help that they may potentially need.

## OBJECTIVES

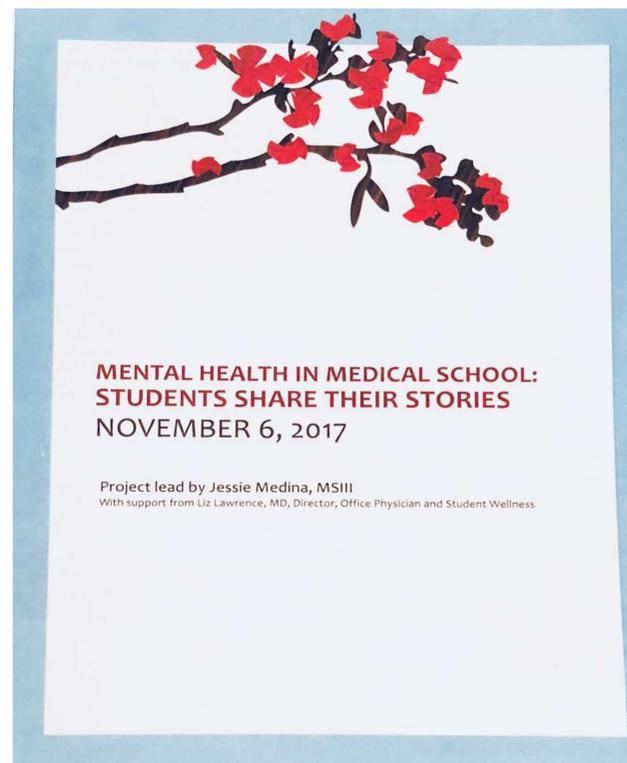
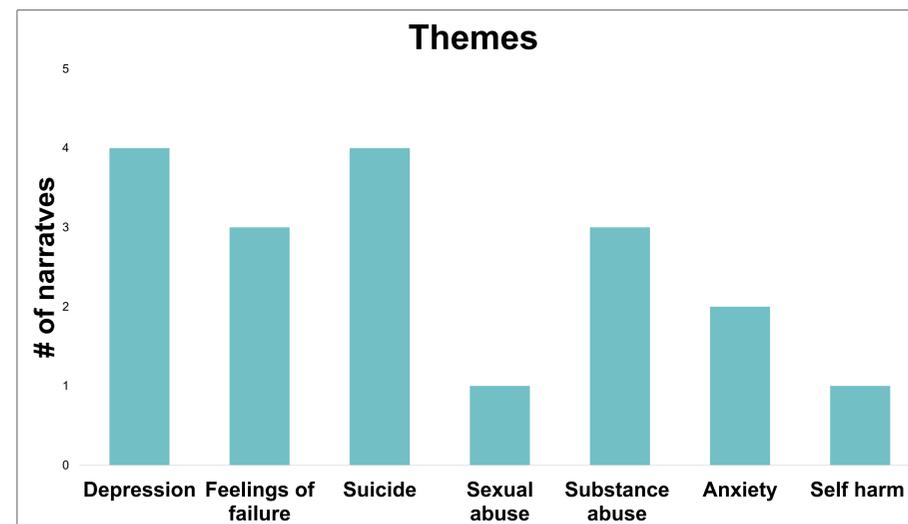
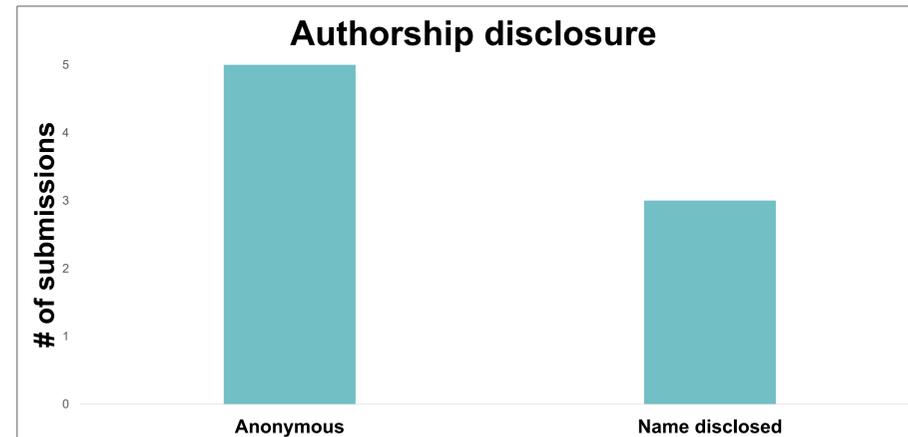
- Discuss the prevalence and significance of mental health illness in medical students
- Promote a more accepting culture of mental health illnesses in medical school
- Provide a safe venue for students to express and discuss their experiences with mental health

## METHODS

The UNM Director of Physician and Student Wellness (EL) and a third-year medical student (JM) sent an email to all medical students at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine (UNM SOM) inviting them to submit a reflection on their personal experiences with mental health. Any form of writing was welcome, including essays, stories, and poems. Although students could share their work anonymously when published, all pieces were submitted by e-mail, campus mail, or in person to the Wellness Director so that any students with active thoughts of suicide could be identified promptly.

The unedited submissions were bound in a journal. All students at the SOM were invited to an event to read and discuss their narratives in a safe environment with the Wellness Director and a psychologist present to help facilitate discussion. After the reading, which was attended both by authors and non-authors, hard copies and electronic copies of the journal were distributed to the larger SOM community.

## RESULTS



## CONCLUSIONS

- Medical students are willing to discuss their personal stories of mental health diagnoses and challenges. They welcomed the opportunity to discuss topics they had previously avoided discussing.
- This project shed light on the range of mental health concerns in medical students. The narratives of the students were deeply personal and powerful.
- The narratives were shared without any negative repercussions for the students.

## NEXT STEPS

- A focus group of students to better understand the impressions of the impact of this project
- A second call for submissions this Fall of 2018

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all of the students who bravely shared their stories and to Dr. John Leggott who worked so hard to help support this project.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Dyrbye LN et al. Medical Licensure Questions and Physician Reluctance to Seek Care for Mental Health Conditions. *Mayo Clin Proc.* 2017;92(10):1486–93.
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## Contact Information

jmedina9@salud.unm.edu