

# Seeking Peer Outreach\*: an institutional initiative using peer support to address mental health in medical education

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## Background



Medical students are at higher risk for mental illness and suicide, but unfortunately, many current risk reduction strategies are inadequate.



The Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) created an interdisciplinary Suicide Prevention Council (SPC) to develop solutions tailored to the unique needs of the medical education community.



The SPC along with student leads on the MCW Central Wisconsin (CW) campus developed Seeking Peer Outreach\* (SPO\*) to target key risk factors of stigma and isolation.



Of MCW Medical Students:

- 81%** Aware of MCW services
- 22%** Have used MCW services
- 50%** Felt the need for services but did not pursue

Source: MCW Mental Health Climate Survey



SPO\*'s Mission

1. Change institutional culture
2. Ease the difficult task of asking for help

## Methods



## Pilot Highlights



- Left: Students, staff, and faculty teamed up for local mental health and suicide awareness walk events
- Right: Painting event
- Bottom: Campus poster for suicide awareness/prevention day in September 2021



## Sample SPO\* Team Pledge

- **No judgement.** Be open when talking to peers, and don't judge them, the situation or problem.
- **Assume the best** in one another.
- Be observant, **look for signs in peers.** Don't always assume everyone is okay.
- Everyone matters and is important. **Take care of yourself.**
- Be aware of what **resources** are available to you and peers.
- The main goal is to **support one another, not compete** with one another.
- When in doubt – **reach out!** Just because you may be the support person for another, doesn't mean that you can't also ask for help.
- **Make time** for who and what is important to you.
- Don't be too hard on yourselves. Remember to **give yourself grace.**

## Student Quotes

“Tier 1 peer support systems have allowed me the opportunity to have several raw and honest conversations that have dared me to broaden my perspective, accept change, and build wonderful relationships.”

“I have become more comfortable talking about my own mental health with peers and built a better support system.”

## Conclusions

- Events and monthly small group meetings have helped foster personal growth for students and community trust
- Involving the entire campus emphasizes that community wellness is a group effort
- Emphasis on peer participation allows for support from people who understand the challenges of medical education
- Early pilot data is promising, but it will take time to properly assess impact

## Future Directions

- Enhancing accessibility with an anonymous support platform
- Evaluating program outreach efficacy and utility of Tier 2 training
- Evaluating program impacts on risk factors of stigma and isolation
- Integration into the rest of the MCW system
- Growing to encompass other wellness initiatives, mental health services, and professional identity formation objectives

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to a host of people who have been critical to SPO\*'s efforts. Firstly, the other student leads/co-founders: Margaret Lieb, Marissa O'Hair, and Meghan Peterson. Dr. Jeffery Fritz, Dr. David Cipriano, Kerri Corcoran, Sara Kohlbeck, and Christopher Knight have all played roles in developing SPO\* and facilitating the pilot. We also could not have done this without Dr. Lisa Dodson and funding from the Sentry Grant. Finally, thank you to the rest of the MCW-CW campus for their participation in SPO\* and willingness to be a part of this important work.