

## Implementation of an Online-Platform at the University of Freiburg to Help Medical Students Cope with Stress

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**Abstract :** A majority of medical students at the University of Freiburg reported stress-related psychosomatic symptoms which are often associated with their studies. International research supports these findings, as medical students worldwide seem to be at special risk for mental health problems. In some countries and institutions, psychologically based interventions that assist medical students in coping with their stressors have been implemented. It turned out that anonymity is an important aspect here. Many students fear a potential damage of reputation when being associated with mental health problems, which may be due to a high level of competitiveness in classes. Therefore, we launched an online-platform where medical students could anonymously seek help and exchange their experiences with fellow students and experts. Medical students of all semesters have access to it through the university's learning management system (called "ILIAS"). The informative part of the platform consists of exemplary videos showing medical students (actors) who act out scenes that demonstrate the antecedents of stress-related psychosomatic disorders. These videos are linked to different expert comments, describing the exhibited symptoms in an understandable and normalizing way. The (inter-)active part of the platform consists of self-help tools (such as meditation exercises or general tips for stress-coping) and an anonymous interactive forum where students can describe their stress-related problems and seek guidance from experts and/or share their experiences with fellow students. Besides creating an immediate proposal to help affected students, we expect that competitiveness between students might be diminished and bondage improved through mutual support between them. In the initial phase after the platform's launch, it was accessed by a considerable number of medical students. On a closer look it appeared that platform sections like general information on psychosomatic-symptoms and self-treatment tools were accessed far more often than the online-forum during the first months after the platform launch. Although initial acceptance of the platform was relatively high, students showed a rather passive way of using our platform. While user statistics showed a clear demand for information on stress-related psychosomatic symptoms and its possible remedies, active engagement in the interactive online-forum was rare. We are currently advertising the platform intensively and trying to point out the assured anonymity of the platform and its interactive forum. Our plans, to assure students their anonymity through the use of an e-learning facility and promote active engagement in the online forum, did not (yet) turn out as expected. The reasons behind this may be manifold and based on either e-learning related issues or issues related to students' individual needs. Students might, for example, question the assured anonymity due to a lack of trust in the technological functioning university's learning management system. However, one may also conclude that reluctance to discuss stress-related psychosomatic symptoms with peer medical students may not be solely based on anonymity concerns, but could be rooted in more complex issues such as general mistrust between students.

**Keywords :** e-tutoring, stress-coping, student support, online forum

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