Factors Associated with Social Isolation Among Graduate & Professional Healthcare Students

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Background:
- Social isolation is the lack of meaningful social networks; also referred to as perceived or subjective social isolation or loneliness
- Social isolation has been linked to negative health outcomes in undergraduate students:
  - Rated usual daily events as more “intensively stressful”
  - Demonstrated greater vascular resistance
  - Slower wound healing
  - Compromised physiological functioning
  - Poorer sleep efficiency
- Limited data regarding social isolation in graduate or professional student population

Objectives:
- To determine factors associated with social isolation among graduate/professional HC students
- To measure relationships between student characteristics and self-ratings of social isolation/loneliness.
- To raise awareness about the health effect of social isolation on an individual

Methods:
- Design: Mixed method (quantitative and qualitative data)
- Source: Electronic survey containing multiple choice and open-ended questions
- 17 unique items (e.g. demographic, behaviors, supports) & 21 items of the UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3.2
- Outcome question: ”Would you consider yourself socially isolated? (Yes/No)
- Participants: graduate and professional students of 5 healthcare colleges: Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Nursing, and Public Health

Quantitative Results:
- 427 surveys returned; 398 considered usable
- Of those saying “Yes,” they were isolated:
  - Strong support system (Nos vs Yes) 3.45 (1.51, 5.45, 0.0098*
  - Disability (Yes vs No) 15.50 (1.14, 15.50, 0.0094*
  - English Second language (Yes vs No) 4.83 (1.35, 15.50, 0.0150)
  - Social Media hours 0.94 (0.87, 0.94, 0.1402)
  - Socializing hours 0.94 (0.85, 0.94, 0.2046)
  - Study hours 1.02 (0.99, 1.02, 0.1883)
  - Family/dependent-care hours 1.03 (1.00, 1.03, 0.0568)

Qualitative Results:
- 115 comments provided; 96 usable
- Comments painted very detailed picture
- Factors Increasing Risk:
  - No time
  - Older age
  - Married students
  - Online program
  - Being shy/ introverted
  - Students from out of state
  - Feeling different than those around them
  - Competitiveness of the program
  - Lack of opportunity to engage with others
- Protective Factors:
  - Organization (College)-Promotes socialization and involvement
  - Community supportive group outside the program

Conclusion:
- 19.4% of respondents considered themselves socially isolated
- Five factors had significant positive association (more likely) and two factors had significant negative association (less likely) with social isolation
- Many qualitative factors mentioned as barriers to connectedness; Collegiate structure/community support appears most protective
- Additional research needed to determine what interventions are most effective in preventing alleviating social isolation in this population.

References: