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Short- and medium-term effect of a virtual reality-based intervention on the psychological health of informal caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease

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Abstract

Virtual reality (VR) is emerging as a useful tool for improving knowledge, empathy and self-efficacy in educational programmes. Our study aims to test the short- and medium-term effect of virtual reality (VR)-based empathy training integrated into an online psycho-education programme and aimed at informal caregivers (iCGs) of people with mild-to-moderate Alzheimer's disease. 60 iCGs were randomized in a 6-week psychoeducational program (control arm) or in the same psychoeducational program integrated with VR (experimental arm). VR consisted of 360-degree videos and lets caregivers experience dementia symptoms from the patient's perspective. Before and after the intervention and again after 2 months, iCGs completed validate scales to assess burden (ZBI), perceived stress (PSS), anxiety (STAI-Y1&2) and perceived self-efficacy for caregiving tasks (RSCSE). Pre-post differences were tested with paired t-tests. Linear mixed models were used to test the interventions effects. 27 iCGs assigned to the control arm (age mean= 56; female:82%; children:63%) and 29 to experimental arm (age mean=54; female:79%; children:68%) concluded the intervention. The VR-based intervention decreased score of ZBI ($t_{(28)}=2.154$; $p=0.040$; Cohen's $d=0.400$), PSS ($t_{(28)}=2.177$, $p=0.038$; Cohen's $d=0.404$), STAI-Y ($t_{(18)}=2.400$, $p=0.23$, Cohen's $d=0.446$) and increase two domains of RSCS: responding to disruptive patient behaviors (RSCSE-RDB: $t_{(28)}=-2.358$, $p=0.026$; Cohen's $d=0.438$), and controlling upsetting thoughts (RSCSE-CUT: $t_{(28)}=-2.126$, $p=0.042$; Cohen's $d=0.395$). In the control arm, changes due to intervention did not reach statistical significance. According mixed models, both interventions have a positive short-term effect, significantly reducing scores of ZBI (experimental arm; $p=0.026$; control arm $p=0.038$), PSS (experimental arm; $p=0.036$) and STAI-Y (experimental arm; $p=0.017$). In the experimental arm, levels of caregiver burden ($p=0.026$), perceived stress ($p<0.001$) and self-efficacy



($p = 0.006$) were maintained even after two months. These preliminary results support the feasibility and short- to medium-term effectiveness of the VR-based psycho-education intervention.



Different coping strategies and addictive behaviors in domestic and international medical students: a comparative study

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Abstract

Introduction: Emerging adulthood represents a critical phase for the onset of various mental disorders. This is particularly evident in the stressful environment of medical education, where the prevalence of psychological distress and burnout is remarkably high.

The complex relationship between stress and coping strategies may lead to the emergence of addictive behaviors as maladaptive self-medication mechanisms.

This study aims to investigate stress and coping strategies in a cohort of medical students and to assess the prevalence of addictive behaviors and their relationship with perceived stress.

Methods: A cohort of international and domestic students from the Medicine and Surgery school at San Luigi Gonzaga University Hospital of Turin was enrolled. Data were collected via validated instruments such as the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) and the Coping Orientation to Problem Experienced Inventory (COPE), alongside an assessment of addictive behaviors aligned with DSM-5 criteria.

Results: A substantial portion of participants reported high perceived stress, with notable differences between domestic (46%) and international students (25.7%). A significant correlation emerged between elevated stress and a decline in active coping strategies among Italian students.

Addictive behaviors were widely reported for relief from negative emotions (98.4% of the sample), relaxation (97.5%), and performance enhancement (82.5%). Distinct patterns were observed between the two groups, particularly regarding internet use and gaming.

Conclusion: The study reveals critical insights into the stress-related challenges and coping capacities among medical students. It underscores the need to develop comprehensive frameworks that not only address the coping strategy diversity and the risk of addiction but also promote student well-being and their professional engagements.



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