

The power of positive feedback

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Dear Editor,

As I reflect upon my clinical placements at medical school thus far, a common trend emerges. Rotations with regular feedback and encouragement positively impacted my opinion of that area of medicine, attracting me and increasing the likelihood that I will consider that field in the future. Although few, negative experiences of depreciation or public humiliation due to a lack of knowledge, completely turned me off a specialty and formed a negative lasting impression (regardless of my initial thoughts).

As a doctor and medical teacher, do you take the time to introduce students to the team or include them in discussion? Do you create a supportive and encouraging learning environment, a safe space where students are comfortable asking questions? You may not realise the impact that such simple gestures have on students' learning experiences (and cortisol levels). Being encouraged and included makes learners feel at ease and willing to engage in positive learning opportunities - providing you with plenty of chances to persuade them that your specialty is the best!

There is a lot to be said for the Irish proverb 'Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí - praise the youth and they will flourish', especially in terms of medical education. As human beings, our brains are wired to respond positively to encouragement, boosting our mood and self-esteem.(1) This plays a role in the evaluation we make of ourselves, making us feel competent and motivating us to reach our potential.(2) Medical students, both in my experience and in literature, commonly display perfectionistic personality traits, setting unrealistic standards and using negative reinforcement to aim for flawlessness.(3) I, too, am guilty of this nature. The overwhelming volume of medical information distracts us from the vitality of self-reflection - a time to consider what we already know and pinpoint the goals we wish to achieve.

Nonetheless, constructive criticism, in the form of feedback questionnaires or open discussion, cannot be undermined.(4)

Identifying strengths and personalising feedback educates scholars about their learning styles and how these can be manipulated to achieve their personal objectives. The Pendleton model, a learner-centred feedback strategy, uses open questions to highlight positive behaviours, initiate reflection and actively develop plans to address an area that requires improvement. This feedback style, which I encourage you to consider, has been particularly useful in the optimisation of my medical training. In fact, I plan to incorporate this approach in my future facilitation of feedback as it encompasses the essential elements of being a good teacher; motivating students to assess and refine their learning in a non-judgemental and unthreatening environment, while kickstarting reflective practice early in training.(4,5) After all, a good start is half the work.

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