Academic assessment and psychological distress among medical students: How do they ACT?

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Background
Assessment often invokes stress or anxiety. In curriculum-development, there is an increasing emphasis for medical educators to consider the health and well-being of their students. This study aims to determine the perceived stress and subsequent stress-management techniques of students during a cumulative assessment program.

Discussion
The interview-quotes illustrate, that students often experience assessment as a battlefield in which they hope to achieve victory. Experiential avoidance of anxiety came in different shapes and sizes. We hypothesize that a more committed and deliberate coping style – as used in ACT – could contribute to students’ well-being. In future research, we will explore, implement and evaluate the possibilities to enhance psychological flexibility of our students during periods of assessment.

Method
In a focus-group interview setting, 2 groups of medical students (n=7, n=5) discussed this topic on 4 different moments throughout their first year of college. The ‘ACT hexaflex’ was used as a framework for the interview guide. Special attention was given to ‘Acceptance’ and ‘Committed Action’. The study was carried out at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.


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