Optimism and Step 1
Nathan Schleinkofer, BS; Komal; Kochhar, MBBS, MHA; Emily Walvoord, MD
Indiana University School of Medicine

Abstract

Background
Optimism is a personality trait that correlates with improved coping skills, physical health, and emotional wellbeing. Various interventions have been shown to increase optimistic thinking. To date, there have been few investigations into the effect of optimism on academic performance.

Methods
Beginning in February 2019, one week after completing their foundational sciences curriculum, 2nd year medical students (n=112) at the Indiana University School of Medicine completed the Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R), which assesses dispositional optimism. The correlation between Optimism scores and Step 1 exam scores were examined.

Results
There was a small positive correlation (Pearson 0.257) between Optimism scores and Step 1 exam scores (p=0.006).

Conclusions
Optimism may be a potentially significant factor associated with medical student performance. Interventions to increase optimism may prove useful for improving student academic performance and possibly their overall wellbeing.

Introduction
Optimism is a personality trait that correlates with improved coping skills, physical health, and emotional wellbeing. Various interventions have been shown to increase optimistic thinking, such as cognitive behavioral therapy. To date, there have been few investigations into the effect of optimism on academic performance. For medical students, the USMLE Step 1 exam is a significant stressor that has a large impact on future career options.

Discussion
Participants in this study had similar scores to the reported population norms for Optimism and Step 1 scores (22.1 and 233, respectively). The results of this study showed a small, though significant, positive correlation between Optimism Scores and Step 1 Exam scores. This may indicate that the development of positive coping mechanisms such as optimism are a potential intervention for improving student performance. However, the main constraint of this study was the inability to establish a causal relationship between the two variables.

With the recent change in Step 1 scoring to pass/fail, it will be less evident whether optimistic thinking has an impact on standardized test scores. It is also unclear whether the results of this study are generalizable to each student’s overall academic performance.

Conclusions
Optimism may be a potentially significant factor associated with medical student performance, specifically on the USMLE Step 1 exam.

Further research should investigate if a causal relationship exists between the two factors. If such a relationship is found, interventions specifically targeted to increase optimism may prove useful for improving student academic performance and possibly their overall wellbeing.

References