

Acknowledging suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety in Physician Assistants



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PURPOSE: To understand the degree of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations in PAs and PA students.

Background

Suicide and suicidal ideation has not been closely studied in physician assistants (PAs). COVID-19 has brought additional stressors to the medical field, further increasing suicide risk. Previous findings illustrate, 14% of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe depression and 12% are at risk for moderate to severe anxiety.¹ Comparatively, physicians are also at higher risk for depression and anxiety.^{2,3} Up to 6.4% of physicians having considered suicide in the past year.⁴ Despite the high risk for suicide, physicians are less likely to seek treatment compared to the general population since depression remains stigmatized in medical culture.⁵ We examined if similar attitudes existed among PAs and PA students.

Participants

Phase 1

November 2020 to a random sample of PAs and PA students (PA-S) who were part of a survey panel from the American Academy of PAs (AAPA).

Invited 598 PAs → 66 proceeded
Invited 503 PA-S → 160 proceeded

Phase 2

November 2020 as part of a random sample based survey hosted by the AAPA. At the end of the AAPA survey, respondents were invited to a survey hosted by author 2.

Invited 394 PAs → 202 proceeded
Invited 494 PA-S → 437 proceeded

Phase 3

January 31 to February 1, 2021 as part of an annual census hosted by the AAPA to all PAs in the US. At the end of this survey hosted by AAPA, respondents were invited to a survey hosted by author 2.

Invited 2,614 PAs → 939 proceeded

The overall estimated completion rate was 57.9%.

Measures

Depression: Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)

Anxiety: GAD-7

Additional Relevant Questions

- Have you ever felt suicidal or attempted suicide since the start of your professional career or becoming a student?
- Was your suicide attempt or suicidal ideation within the past year?
- Have stressors from your academic or professional experiences contributed to your suicidal ideations or attempts?
- Who did you tell about your thoughts of suicide?
- Do you plan to or have you already sought help for your feelings of distress, including stress, burnout, depression or anxiety?

Risk of Depression

14.5%

(10.4% to 19.9% CI)
of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe depression

8% in adults in US⁶

Thoughts of Suicide

8.8%

(6.7% to 11.2% CI)

of PAs said they have had thoughts of suicide since they started their career

Risk of Anxiety

12.3%

(9.0% to 16.4% CI)
of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe anxiety

19% in adults in US⁷

Past Year

52.7% (39.7% to 65.5% CI)

of PAs who have had thoughts of suicide said it was in the past year

Work Contribution

66.7% (52.7% to 78.7% CI)

said that stressors from work contributed to their suicidal ideations or attempt.

38.7%

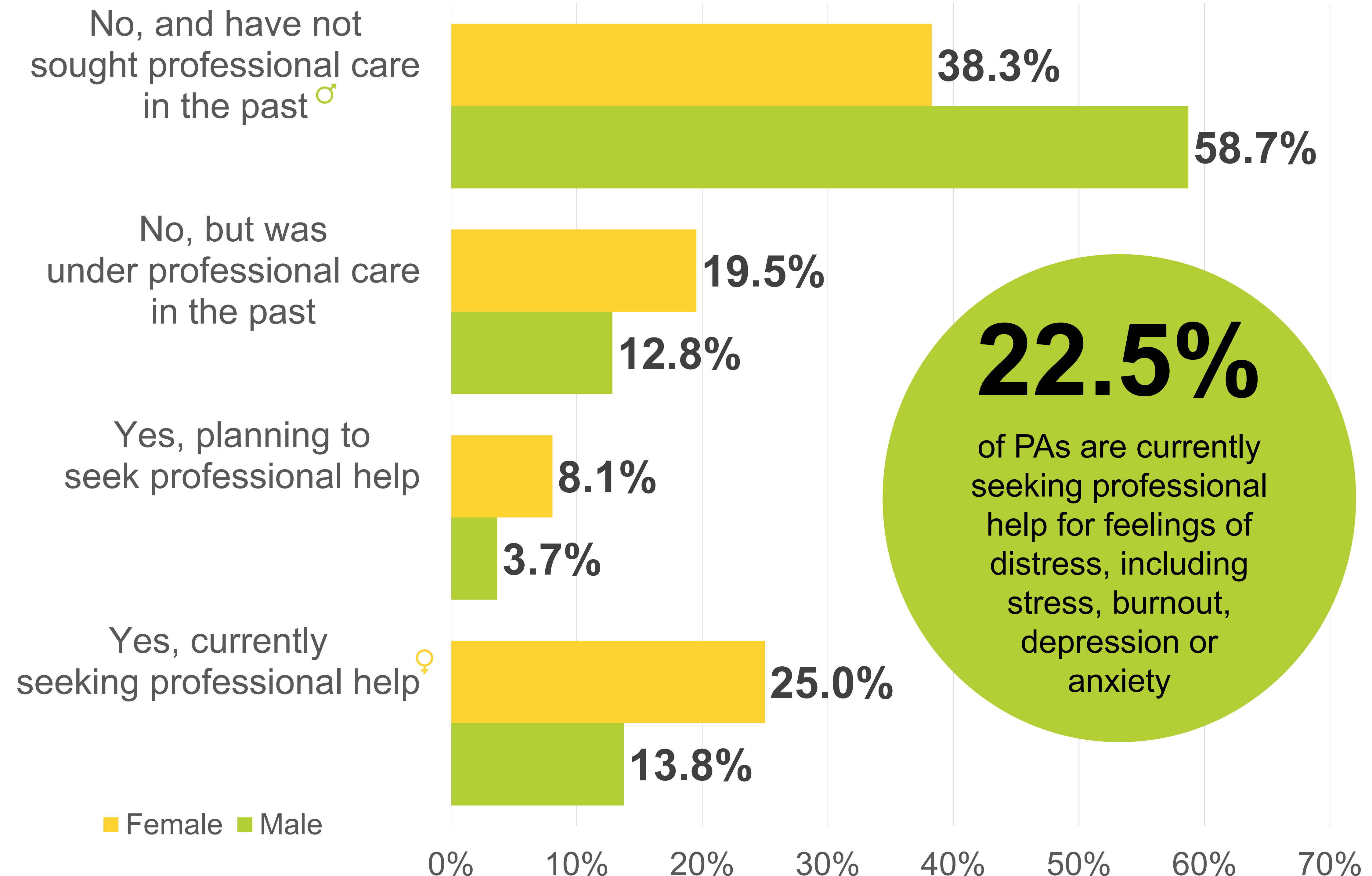
of PAs are at risk for moderate to severe anxiety and/or depression, and/or had suicidal ideations since becoming a PA.

Female

PAs were more likely to seek help for feelings of distress

Help Seeking Behaviors* by Gender

*for feelings of distress, including stress, burnout, depression or anxiety



♂ Males were more likely to say "No, and have not sought professional care in the past."

♀ Females were more likely to say "Yes, currently seeking professional help."

Future Research

Future research should understand how factors such as:

- Personality
- Social situations
- Licensure

Inhibit PAs' help-seeking behaviors.

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