

The impacts of COVID-19 on eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours: Healthcare Professional Perspective

What we already know

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has negatively impacted the mental health of many around the world, but particularly those with pre-existing mental health issues such as eating disorders. Changes to living situations, social distancing mandates, and increased stress and uncertainty associated with the pandemic are thought to be a trigger for eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours.

What we did

In this study, we were interested in assessing the collective impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours. We conducted a literature search for studies on the topic, revealing a total of 72 studies whose results were collated.

What we found

We found an increase in eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours, like binge eating and food restriction, associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, two groups were most negatively impacted: those with a diagnosed eating disorder and children and adolescents.

We found people used eating disorder behaviours to self-manage heightened psychological distress associated with the pandemic. There were no studies that provided results about the impacts of the pandemic on healthcare providers.

What this means for healthcare professionals

Early detection of eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours is key. As such it is important that primary healthcare professionals remain vigilant of eating disorder behaviours, particularly as they are often the first point of contact within the health system. This includes disordered eating behaviours such as weight and eating concerns, but also the risks associated with disordered eating such as gastrointestinal problems, bone loss, and increased anxiety and depression. More information about medical management of eating disorders in the community is available [here](#).

During the pandemic, primary healthcare professionals might have noticed an increase in the number of patients presenting with disordered eating or suspected eating disorders. These symptoms can be screened using a short tool such as the [SCOFF](#). Support to complete an eating disorder management plan or Mental Health Treatment Plan is available [here](#).

Given what we have learnt about the impact on carers, it is also important for primary healthcare professionals to check in on the carers of those with eating disorders. This will ensure that they are adequately supported and receive professional treatment as needed.

We understand the emergence of the pandemic has placed additional challenges on mental health professionals for the delivery of treatment. Ultimately, increased workloads and workplace constraints such as working from home, have created the perfect environment for potential long-term burnout. We

encourage you to take time out for yourself to engage in self-care activities. Doing so means that you can provide the best care possible to the growing number of people in need of eating disorder services.

Reference

McLean, C. P., Utpala, R., & Sharp, G. (2021, November 13). The impacts of COVID-19 on eating disorders and disordered eating: A mixed studies systematic review and implications for healthcare professionals, carers, and self. Retrieved from psyarxiv.com/f27y8.

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