

The impacts of COVID-19 on eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours: Lived Experience 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.

What this means for people with an eating disorder

Results from our study show people with an eating disorder are at higher risk for being impacted negatively by the pandemic so if you have experienced more distress during the pandemic compared to those around you, remember you are not alone. We encourage you to remember the set of skills, mental exercises, and self-care routines you have developed to help manage your eating disorder in the past and use them now. For example, journaling or meditation can be used to keep structure and routine to your day, manage increased stress, and remain resilient during these times.

It is important that if you are already engaged in treatment, you continue to do so during this time. Seeking help may look differently during the pandemic like increased use of telehealth. But if regularly visiting a GP or psychologist, or attending outpatient care is part of your routine, is it important that this is continued. It is also important to remember that you may need more support during this time and encourage you to discuss your needs with your treating team.

We also realise that there are many people who want to receive treatment but cannot access it quickly due to long wait times. We know this is very challenging and encourage you to keep seeking support from your GP or Paediatrician while you wait.

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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