

Evaluating the Quality of Eating Disorder Treatments via Patients' Experiences and Expectations

This study was conducted as a partial requirement for the Bachelor of Science in Psychology (Honours) at the University of Canberra. Following feedback from examiners, the results of this study may be published.

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Aim: This study aimed to fill the gap within the Australian literature regarding the helpfulness of eating disorder treatments as perceived by current and former patients. Patients are considered to be particularly insightful when evaluating the quality of treatment for mental illness, as their opinions are derived from their own experiences and expectations.

Participants: An online questionnaire was completed by 135 members (131 females and 4 males) of various eating disorder foundations within Australia. Of these participants, 85 reported that they were currently suffering from an eating disorder, 46 reported that they were former sufferers, and 4 chose not to indicate their current eating disorder status.

Results

First Experiences of Treatment:

This study revealed a 4.5 to 5.5 year gap between the age at which individuals first experienced eating disorder symptoms, and the age at which individuals first sought help or professional treatment for their eating disorder. Individuals were most likely to report having first spoken to a non-professional such as their mother or a friend regarding their eating disorder. When seeking help for the first time, the majority of participants regarded the experiences as positive. When seeking professional treatment for the first time however, the majority of participants regarded the experience as negative.

The Helpfulness of Treatment:

Overall, 64% of participants indicated that they were satisfied with the treatment they had received, whilst 36% indicated that they were unsatisfied with their treatment experience to date. With respect to specific treatment types, individual therapy, group therapy, medication, inpatient care, and self help manuals were all considered to be helpful forms of treatment for an eating disorder. Family therapy however, was considered to be unhelpful by the majority of participants, with many indicating that this type of treatment 'made the situation worse'. Psychologists, general practitioners, dieticians, counsellors, nurses and social workers were also considered be helpful by the majority of participants, whilst psychiatrists were considered to be unhelpful. It should be noted however, that the helpfulness of treatments and treatment providers was based solely upon patients' opinions, and did not take clinical outcome measures into account.

The Helpfulness of Community Managed Associations:

This study also highlighted the helpfulness of community managed eating disorder associations. The provision of information and education by community managed associations was considered to be helpful by the majority of participants, as was support via email, helplines, face-to-face support groups, and online support groups. It should be noted that group therapy was considered to be more helpful when facilitated by a former sufferer than when facilitated by a current sufferer.

Expectations of Treatment:

The results of this study highlighted the importance that patients place upon being taken seriously whilst in treatment, and being treated by a professional who is trustworthy, interested, honest, respectful and supportive. The majority of participants also thought that it was not important to receive standardised treatment, to keep an eating diary, or to restore weight first before focusing on other problems. A comparison between the expectations current and former sufferers also revealed that former sufferers place a higher level of importance on gaining an understanding about eating disorders, and learning to understand that they have a problem.

Suggestions to Improve Treatment:

Many useful suggestions were made in order to improve treatment for individuals with eating disorders. Many participants suggested that more affordable services need to be made available, in particular, more day programs, more inpatient care facilities, and more services in rural areas around Australia. Many participants also suggested a need for improved education for professionals so that they can better understand and empathise with their patients. Other frequently reported suggestions to improve treatment surrounded making treatment more individualised, improving education and awareness of eating disorders within the general public, and focussing less on weight whilst in treatment.

Thankyou to all of the participants who took the time to complete the questionnaire.

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