

Researcher looking for emotional causes of anorexia

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Michelle Emmerling

(PhysOrg.com) -- When it comes to treating people suffering from eating disorders, Michelle Emmerling would like to see caregivers look beyond the physical issues. Emmerling, a PhD candidate in counselling psychology in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, is focusing her doctoral research on the role of psychological and emotional factors for anorexics. She wants to give voice to their struggles and the causes of their disorder.

However, she needs volunteers willing to discuss their feelings to help with her research.

Emmerling is looking for approximately 90 local participants, who are recovered or in recovery from anorexia, to participate in her research study, which will help her address what she sees as an oft-forgotten component in treatment, the [emotional](#) component of the disorder. Given previous studies on anorexia that have been conducted with small numbers of subjects, she knows that her goal is ambitious. However, by understanding more about the feelings involved with the disorder, she is hoping to give expression to the anorexic patients' pain, where currently, she says, no words can be found.

"I'm looking at whether the participants are even aware of what emotions are coming up or if they have the language to talk about their emotions," said Emmerling. "I'm looking at [the research] in terms of autobiographical memory. Are these girls able to have a kind of coherent life narrative and what are the memories from their past that they use to define the person they are today?"

Undefined self-identity and an inability to cope with emotion are reasons she believes that cause people to relapse, but prescribed treatments allow recovered anorexics to return to a more acceptable and healthy body weight. However, when underlying issues that have not been addressed begin to resurface or new stresses occur, sufferers of anorexia do not have established adaptive coping mechanisms built in to guide their behaviours.

"Anorexia patients often report feeling very lost, dissociated from who they are, trapped in situations," said Emmerling. "When the stressful situation comes up again, the patients resort back to the starvation mode (restricting food intake as a coping mechanism) because it's a way to avoid or distract themselves from having to deal with the stressful situation; it's a maladaptive solution to real-life problems"

Bottling emotions leads to destructive cycle of using food as a distraction

from the overwhelming emotional response, notes Emmerling. The big step in resolving the emotional component of anorexia, she says, is getting those who suffer from anorexia to talk about what is going on, finding an outlet of expression that will allow them to share the inner chaos that may be caused by a variety of stressors, such as being abused or even being raised in an environment where emotions were not expressed or validated.

To facilitate her research, Emmerling is using emotion-focused therapy, a psychotherapy developed by Canadian psychologist Les Greenberg. Emmerling says that her solution is not a replacement for current treatments, but a complement to them. She believes that addressing the link between emotion and the sense of self in treating an [eating disorder](#) is critical in overall treatment and recovery.

Once her research is in place, she hopes to have a clearer picture of the issues that plague anorexics in overcoming their affliction. But first, she needs to find the voices that will help her accomplish this task, something she hopes more people will step forward to do.

"I'm asking questions about some of their memories who define who they are as people and their [feelings](#), so really getting an understanding of the kind of things that are going on, beyond the physical, which is sometimes neglected in treatment," said Emmerling. "What I'm really doing is encouraging people who have suffered from [anorexia](#) to talk to me.

"I really want to be able to help and understand this [aspect of the disease] and try to make a difference for the treatments provided; not only for them, but also for other people who might suffer with this disorder down the road."

Provided by University of Alberta

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