

Stand-up comedy workshops can aid eating disorder recovery

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Kent-led research has broken new ground by showing that stand-up comedy workshops can complement conventional approaches to eating disorder recovery.

Comedy For Coping, a six-week interactive online comedy course aimed at people with experience of an eating disorder, demonstrated that stand-

up comedy is a feasible and innovative way of supporting eating disorder [recovery](#).

The workshops were created by Dave Chawner, a stand-up comedian who has lived experience of an eating disorder, and co-developed by Dr. Dieter Declercq, a senior lecturer and co-director for the Centre For Health and Medical Humanities in Kent's School of Arts. Working together, they put vital research and academic understanding into an easy-to-use, relatable format.

The research, [published](#) by the *Mental Health Review Journal*, demonstrated that stand-up comedy offered participants novel ways to support their recovery journeys compared to traditional approaches to eating disorder recovery. Findings included:

- Participants with eating disorders could connect without talking about their illnesses
- Participants felt empowered to take control and take positive risks
- Participants felt that the stand-up comedy course brought a sense of fun and light-heartedness to recovery
- For several participants the course offered a space where they could 'be themselves'—and reclaim parts of their identity that otherwise felt 'lost' to the eating disorder
- Some participants reported that it gave them meaning in life and boosted their mood

Sticking to the course also required commitment, which cultivated a sense of achievement and personal responsibility that carried through to other areas of life, including recovery. Some participants identified new goals and roles through the course, which became reasons to stay committed to recovery.

The success of the workshops comes at a time when there have been continuous calls for greater consideration of alternative forms of support for people experiencing mental health difficulties. While evidence already exists that arts approaches are beneficial for eating disorder recovery, stand-up comedy has not yet been explored through a pilot of this kind.

Workshop sessions ran for one hour once a week for six weeks. The workshops train participants to deliver a stand-up comedy set to each other by the end of the series. Weekly sessions introduce key skills and understandings around attitude, stage presence, jokes, and set writing and performance. In a typical week, participants would learn about comedy theory and participate in practical exercises.

Dr. Declercq, who led the research, said, "This has been a unique collaboration. We connected our expertise in humanities research with Dave's stand-up comedy practice, supported by mental health specialists. Lived experiences also informed our approach. The result is a novel pathway that helps us to understand better how comedy workshops can support recovery."

Chawner said, "This is a fun intervention, but it is not frivolous. Comedy was integral to my recovery from anorexia. I want to pay that forward to create a low-cost/high-impact method of changing the way we understand eating disorders, to help people see they are more than their diagnosis, and that recovery is (and should be) enjoyable."

The project research team included staff from Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust (SPFT), strengthening connections between this [innovative research](#) and established approaches to eating disorder recovery. This followed a research project by the team looking into how interventions utilize comedy for individuals experiencing mental health problems (published by [Frontiers in Psychology](#)).

Dr. Declercq and Chawner are now working with SPFT to develop a series of short videos and podcasts to make the research findings more accessible—and use comedy as a way to shift understanding around eating disorder recovery.

More information: Dieter Declercq et al, "Finding light in the darkness": exploring comedy as an intervention for eating disorder recovery, *Mental Health Review Journal* (2024). [DOI: 10.1108/MHRJ-08-2023-0045](https://doi.org/10.1108/MHRJ-08-2023-0045)

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