

Research reveals toll of pandemic on those with eating disorders

August 24 2020



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The COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound, negative impact on nine out of ten people with experience of eating disorders, a new study from Northumbria University, Newcastle, reveals.

According to Beat, the UK's eating disorder charity, approximately 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder. Until now, little was known about the impact of the [pandemic](#) on this population.

While it is evident that the COVID-19 outbreak is having a significant effect on the [global population](#), research carried out by academics from Northumbria's Department of Psychology shows that the pandemic raises additional, unique challenges for individuals with eating [disorders](#).

The study comes after calls from the scientific community to investigate the mental health consequences of the pandemic for [vulnerable groups](#), such as the elderly and those with serious mental health conditions, including those with lived experience of eating disorders.

In addition to raising awareness of the impact of the pandemic for those affected by eating disorders, the results have the potential to influence future health service provisions, guidance and policies. The paper will be published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* online on Monday 24 August.

Exploring the impact on wellbeing

During the early stages of the UK pandemic lockdown, Dr. Dawn Branley-Bell and Dr. Catherine Talbot surveyed individuals across the country who are currently experiencing, or in recovery from, an eating disorder.

The results suggest that disruptions to daily life as a result of lockdown and [social distancing](#) may have a detrimental impact on an individual's wellbeing, with almost nine out of ten (87%) of participants reporting that their symptoms had worsened as a result of the pandemic. Over 30% stated that their symptoms were much worse.

Findings indicate detrimental impacts on psychological wellbeing including decreased feelings of control, increased feelings of social isolation, increased rumination about disordered eating, and low feelings of social support.

Through analysis of participants' responses, researchers found that the negative effects may be due to changes to individuals: regular routine, living situation, time spent with friends and family, access to treatment, engagement in physical activity, relationship with food and use of technology.

Crucial findings

One of the major challenges faced by those surveyed was a reduction in healthcare service provision or discrepancies in access to healthcare services. Some reported being prematurely discharged from inpatient units, having treatment suspended or continuing to stay on a waiting list for treatment, and receiving limited post-diagnostic support.

A reduction in service provision caused some participants to report feeling like a "burden", an "inconvenience", and "forgotten" by the government and NHS.

Beat, a national charity for people with eating disorders with over 25 years' experience of working with sufferers and their loved ones, has seen an 81% increase in contact across all Helpline channels. This includes a 125% rise in social media contact and a 115% surge in online group attendance.

Tom Quinn, Beat's Director of External Affairs, said: "We have seen first-hand the devastating impact the pandemic has had on those suffering from or vulnerable to eating disorders and their loved ones. More and more people are reaching out to our Helpline services, and we

are prepared to support anyone in need at this time."

The research team warns that the consequences of not being able to access professional [eating disorder](#) treatment during the pandemic could be severe, causing some peoples' conditions to become much worse and, in some cases, could prove fatal.

Media coverage and social media posts were also cited as a source of anxiety due to the general population's preoccupation with food, weight gain and exercise.

Although some positive aspects of technology use were identified, those surveyed repeatedly highlighted the emphasis upon eating and exercise that has become a dominant theme across social media during the pandemic and the associated lockdown.

Academics stressed that while positive messages about diet and exercise can be beneficial for the majority of the population, it is important for healthcare and government to acknowledge that these can also be triggering or upsetting for vulnerable populations.

Critical action required

Recommendations on how these issues can be addressed via further developments within healthcare, research, governance and policy were also outlined in the study. Dr. Branley-Bell and Dr. Talbot explain that this could benefit those experiencing eating disorders and also mental health issues more broadly.

Dr. Dawn Branley-Bell, Research Associate, says: "Our findings highlight that we must not underestimate the longevity of the impact of the pandemic. Individuals with experience of eating disorders will likely experience a long-term effect on their symptoms and recovery. It is

important that this is recognised by healthcare services, and beyond, in order to offer the necessary resources to support this vulnerable population now and on an on-going basis."

Provided by Northumbria University

Citation: Research reveals toll of pandemic on those with eating disorders (2020, August 24)
retrieved 1 May 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-08-reveals-toll-pandemic-disorders.html>

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