Eating disorders in young people and Covid-19

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Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interests.
Over the past year, child and adolescent NHS eating disorder services have experienced
almost a doubling in both urgent and routine referrals.\(^1\) Although services managed to meet
recommended waiting times at first, waiting lists are now starting to build. Much has been said
about the drivers of this observed spike in referrals and hospital admissions.\(^2\) From social
isolation to food insecurity, from pressures to exercise and challenges to lose weight, to loss of
routines and disruptions in accessing face-to-face clinical services, it is difficult to think of a
scenario which could have catalysed so many risk factors for eating disorders at a societal
level. As we carefully return to ‘normal life’ with the rolling-out of vaccines, the challenges faced
by young people and eating disorders services will not suddenly disappear. Now is the time to
assess the scale of the issue, its likely drivers, and think of how to formulate a meaningful
response.

Gauging the burden of eating disorders in young people is the first step towards mobilizing
policy-makers, but these data are still lacking in the UK. Whether the observed spike in referrals
reflects broader behavioural changes in young people or exacerbations of symptoms in groups
already at greater risk is hard to know. Studies of young people’s mental health during the
pandemic used screening tools which do not detect eating disorders.\(^3,4\) A systematic review of
the impact of school closure on young people’s mental health found no studies examining
eating disorders.\(^5\) Population data are vital to capture presentations that might be missed in
clinical settings. Beyond anecdotal evidence, we know little of how the pandemic has affected
young people experiencing behaviours such as purging and binge eating. Binge eating
disorder is accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame and might be more common in young
people with higher weight. Yet, young people with binge eating disorder present to clinical
services less often than prevalence studies would predict.

One concern is that the current rhetoric around individual responsibility for weight loss could
create further help-seeking barriers for young people who already feel stigmatised. The
pandemic has highlighted the profound schism that exists between the ‘obesity’ and eating
disorder fields. Throughout the past year, public health messages have emphasized the
dangers posed by excess weight in exacerbating Covid19 risk. At the height of lockdown,
people were only allowed to leave the house for the purpose of physical activity. Exercise
became one of the few freedoms that remained, stressing its relative importance, and virtue, for
children and young people. Alongside these messages, the Government’s new obesity strategy
included adding calories to menus and using apps to help with and track weight loss.\(^3\) Eating
disorders clinicians, researchers, and activists have repeatedly shown that these strategies are
ineffective for long-term weight loss in young people\textsuperscript{6}, exacerbate eating disorder behaviours in those with established illnesses, and increase eating disorder risk.

While the potential harms of obesity strategies remain to be fully addressed by existing policies, the number of young people presenting to services with medical instability as a result of drastic dietary restriction and requiring admission has soared. Many of these young people who would have previously been classified as ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’, may still be a ‘healthy’ weight, yet their pulse, blood pressure and blood tests tell an alarming story. It is unlikely that the situation will improve over the coming months. Whilst eating disorder referrals increased during lockdown, they increased even more as lockdown measures were relaxed. This might reflect greater help-seeking, which had declined during lockdown\textsuperscript{7} and the vital role schools play in identifying mental health problems in young people. Or it may be that returning to school, with all the social and academic pressures that presents, might also constitute a period of heightened anxiety which could exacerbate eating disorder risk.

Addressing these challenges will require a multi-disciplinary effort. First, it is of paramount importance that eating disorders stop being seen a niche problem of the elite and are understood instead as a public health concern. A recent Finnish study found that 1 in 6 female youth and young adults and one in 40 males met criteria for a diagnosable eating disorder.\textsuperscript{8} Population data are needed to complement clinical activity data in order to plan prevention, screening, and intervention services. More funding for eating disorder services is necessary, as well as new approaches to treatment, developed and evaluated through high quality research. Innovative interventions for specific populations are needed, such as young people with binge eating disorder and those whose illness sits alongside conditions such as autism spectrum disorder. And of course, increased training across health care and among teachers, so that children are promptly identified and referred.

Parents play a crucial role in early intervention for young people with eating disorders\textsuperscript{9}, and need support with how to, and how not to, talk to their child about eating and weight concerns, when to seek help, and how to support their child through treatment. Similarly, we need to ensure that school environments provide balanced information and guidance around weight, food, body image and exercise, and monitor the potential harms of school-based wellbeing initiatives in these areas. Last, it is crucial that policy makers working on campaigns aimed at reducing obesity listen to and collaborate with eating disorder and body image experts. A
COVID-19 has provided the imperative to make this a reality.

REFERENCES


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