

The Role of Social Identities in Eating Disorder Recovery

Jade Streete¹, Dr Niamh McNamara¹, Dr Lucy Betts¹, Dr Juliet Wakefield¹ & Dr Tegan Cruwys²

¹Nottingham Trent University. ²The University of Queensland.

Introduction

- According to the social cure perspective of social identities literature, social groups are important for individual health and well-being⁴
- The Social Identity Model of Recovery, the social support received through social groups aids individuals through life transitions such as addiction recovery¹ and stroke rehabilitation².
- The nature of support from social groups in ED recovery has only been explored in relation to social groups comprised of members recovering from an ED^{3&5}.

Objectives

- The aim of this research was to investigate the role of social identities and the support they provide throughout ED recovery.

Materials & Methods

- 14 females and 2 males in ED recovery (mean age = 27.60, *SD* = 11.92). 15 participants reported official diagnoses, Anorexia (*n*=10), Bulimia (*n*= 3), Anorexia Binge/Purge (*n*=1), Atypical Anorexia (*n*=1).
- Participants completed a semi-structured interview exploring: Participants' experiences of their ED journey in relation to their social groups throughout. What participants' wanted from their recovery and what recovery meant to them.
- Constructivist grounded theory approach was followed

Findings

- An overarching category of 'Retuning to Normal' was established as participants over all desire for their ED recovery. Then three core categories were established as important in achieving this 'return to normal':
'Relinquishing the ED identity'
'Selective disclosure'
'Maintaining supportive social groups'
Acquiring new social groups'

Relinquishing the ED Identity

- Disentangling themselves from the ED
- Identifying that their individual voice is separate from the ED voice
- Having social groups acknowledge that they are not the ED

Emma: "I think it's good and healthy to have people in my life that know all about it and that I know can support me and then to have groups of people in my life that don't know anything about it, so they don't like so they don't identify me as that"

Erica: "I specifically didn't tell anyone at work to start with cus I didn't want to be known as the girl with the eating disorder"

Lily: "they've just been amazing, erm they've sort of been, erm like the parents I always wanted my parents to be like through this thing, which has been incredible. Erm, so that's been a massive, massive, massive help because they recognise that I'm Lily, I'm not *pauses* Anorexia"

Selective disclosure

- Openness about ED allows social groups to be supportive
- Disclosure can lead to surveillance by social groups
- Not involving all social groups in the ED journey
- Not confiding in new social groups once 'recovered'

Milly: "so my biggest part of my recovery was family support"

Maintaining supportive social groups

- Supportive social groups were beneficial for recovery
 - One of the most important aspects of recovery
- Provide a sense of identity continuity for participants
- Recovery subsequently improved ties with supportive groups

Erica: "much better, like we're [family] a lot stronger and they notice things, so they don't let me get away with anything which is so good"

Lily: "Unless I let them in on anything else, like with the newer friends group, I'm just Lily, unless I let them in on the past"

Acquiring new groups

- Developing a social group individuals recovering from EDs allowed participants to feel fully representative of a group
- New peripheral social groups allow participants to be considered as a 'normal' group member not associated with the ED

Jimmy: "I feel that I can tell them [treatment friends] something that might be a bit more challenging to tell like my parents for instance because they know what it feels like, so they know what it can do to you"

Conclusions

- Social groups perceived as supportive and understanding were maintained throughout the ED journey and considered to be highly beneficial for recovery.
- Participants sought to return to being a 'normal' person living a 'normal' life through their recovery
- Both themselves and social groups acknowledgement that the individual is separate from the ED identity was an important step for returning to 'normal'.
- Provides support for the social cure paradigm within ED recovery

References

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Further information

Jade.streete2016@my.ntu.ac.uk