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A study exploring disordered eating patterns in first-year university students: Student and service needs

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A qualitative study exploring disordered eating in a small group of first-year undergraduate students studying for professional health care related degrees (n=12) illustrating what support mechanisms and services are required for those 1st year students experiencing or at risk.

Key issues emerging included: Lack of understanding to the nature/risks associated with disordered eating and the use of disordered eating as a stress coping mechanism; isolation; disordered eating perceived negatively as a mental health issue carried stigma and reticence to acknowledge being wary of the academic/ professional consequences. This was possibly reflected in a sometimes concealed /sub-clinical experience. A number of the students were evidently wary of eating in more public refectories. Students felt very positive about their arrival at university and that their experience with disordered eating could potentially add to their repertoire as future health care professionals.

Conclusion: The University could; further develop its outreach to new students with a more consistently supportive program including stress training and more support via student buddying; extend its program on positive mental health to reduce a sense of stigma within the student population; consistent training in the understanding and person- centered approach to students experiencing disordered eating, particularly the sub-clinical group; consider some small changes and adaptations to the refectory eating areas to better facilitate at risk students. Finally the University could perhaps better use the first few months of student's arrival at university to help embed a program to develop a stronger sense of coherence and wellbeing.

Biography

Dr. John J Power is a lecturer in Nursing and Midwifery at the largest University in N Ireland. He completed both his M. Phil and his Doctorate at Queen's University, Belfast in particular areas of teaching and research include social psychology and public health. Dr. Power is a qualified and practicing nurse. He has been involved in the UK Health Service for a number of years. Prior to his teaching appointment he managed nursing services in part of the Scottish Highlands.

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