

A Reassessment of the Classification and Management of Eating Disorders: Should the Relative Importance of Symptoms and Aetiology Be Re-Balanced?

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Abstract

Eating disorder (ED) pathology is an important cause of psychosocial and physical morbidity across multiple age groups, and is becoming increasingly prevalent^{1,2}. This paper provides an assessment of current knowledge about EDs, addressing the roles of potential causes (aetiology) as well as symptoms. How well this information is reflected by current diagnostic and treatment strategies is considered. The retrieval of data for this project was based on a comprehensive literature search: this method was used to access data pertaining to: (a) current knowledge about ED aetiology, and symptoms; (b) ED classification and management strategies. Once the data were collected and their credibility established, they were used to generate an up-to-date, evidence-based response to the research question. The findings support that aetiological risk factors, including neurobiological, developmental and sociocultural processes, generate psychopathological features that are key to the establishment and maintenance of EDs. There is evidence that these factors are more important for diagnosis and treatment than current classification and management strategies suggest. On the basis of these results, this paper proposes a new model for ED classification, where the diagnosis is based not on specific presenting symptoms, but on the existence of characteristic psychopathological traits, many of which are conserved across ED presentations. The principal implication of this model is that the focus of ED treatment should shift from symptom management to correcting the underlying psychopathology, and its causes. Long-term psychological intervention is likely to be key to achieving this goal, and the therapeutic strategies that could be used are considered.

Biography

Sofia Weiss Goitiandia is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Cambridge, with special interests in psychiatry, and public mental health. Her principal research aim is to conduct effective investigations into mental health that can be used to inform health policy, including the optimisation of diagnostic and treatment guidelines for common psychological illnesses. Outside of her academic study, Sofia is a Supervisor of Neurosciences and Human Behaviour for medical students at the University of Cambridge, as well as an enthusiastic science writer, having written over 40 articles for seven publications whilst a student at Cambridge.



Speaker Publications:

1. Fairburn, C.G. and Cooper Z. (2007). Thinking afresh about the classification of eating disorders. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 40: S107-10.
2. Fairburn, C.G., Cooper, Z., Doll, H.A., O'Connor, M.E., Bohn, K., Hawker, D.M. et al. (2009). Transdiagnostic cognitive-behavioural therapy for patients with eating disorders: a two-site trial with 60-week follow-up. *American Journal of Psychiatry*. 166: 311-9.
3. Fichter, M.M. and Quadflieg, N. (2007). Long-term stability of eating disorder diagnoses. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 40: S61-6.

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