

Breaking myths on exercise and eating disorders: treating eating disorders in exercise referral centres.

By Therese Fostervold Mathisen, PhD, dietitian and exercise physiologist

In this presentation you will learn how exercise physiologists and dietitians may be important health allies in a healthcare system that is not accessible to the growing number of people suffering from eating disorders.

While “Exercise is medicine” have existed as an initiative of the American School of Sports Medicine since 2007, describing how exercise may prevent and treat several physical and mental illnesses, eating disorders have not been addressed. Eating disorders are a group of mental disorders that affect both men and women, but are ten-times more prevalent among women, with a lifetime prevalence of 10-15%. Comorbid disorders are prevalent, which causes severe impairment in life quality and in psychosocial functioning. Compulsive and excessive exercise are examples of such common comorbidities, that increase the severity of the illness. This compulsive behaviour serves as a purging method to control body weight, or as an emotion regulation strategy, hence, physical activity is often restricted during therapy, to ease any symptom behaviour and enhance effect from therapy.

Most people who suffer from eating disorders have bulimia nervosa (BN) or binge-eating disorders (BED), and their access to treatment is not only limited by long waiting lists; they often have high barriers to seeking help, and less than 50% of patients responds favourably to available therapies. As such, there is a need to explore new therapies, which are more available and reach sufficient efficacy in terms of remission rate.

In 2016-2018 a Norwegian group of researchers and clinicians designed and tested a new therapy for BN and BED (*Physical Exercise and Dietary therapy, PED-t*) with the aim of expanding the pool of evidence-based therapies, and finding new professionals and arenas to provide therapy. In this presentation you will increase your knowledge on eating disorders, on neurocognitive effects from exercise, and gain insight into how a controversial exercise-based therapy for bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder performed in a randomized controlled trial with two years of follow up.