

Supporting and Recovery: A Literature Review on Eating Disorder Support Groups

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Support groups are designed to bring individuals together that share common experiences or challenges related to a specific issue (Koski, 2014). In the case of this literature review, support groups that are designed to help individuals recover from eating disorders are being examined, but support groups could also be designed to help people cope with situations such as addiction or grief. Support groups create a safe space for individuals to express their feelings and share coping mechanisms (Koski, 2014). Support groups benefit from addressing individuals' differences and their intersectionality. Addressing these factors can allow people to build meaningful relationships and provide them strength through their journey. Exploring the effectiveness of support groups for individuals with eating disorders, this review examines the impact of support group interventions on overall well-being, recovery rates, and quality of life, considering various methods and participant characteristics to inform future research and practice.

An article titled *The Experience of Adults Recovering from an Eating Disorder in Professionally led Support Groups* investigates the efficacy of support groups in facilitating individual recovery from eating disorders. Recruitment for this investigation was done through a not-for-profit eating disorder recovery agency. Individuals who had previously attended multiple support group sessions were invited to complete an anonymous Google Forms survey, gathering a total of 18 participants who completed a series of open-ended questions (Waller et al., 2021).

The results of this investigation highlight the empowerment theory as an important portion of support groups, especially on the basis of facilitator feedback. Each support group session was conducted by 2 professionally trained counselors who facilitated the meetings through moderating conversation and providing feedback. Participants felt as if the facilitators ensured the safety of the group, identifying facilitator presence a crucial part of the support group (Waller et al., 2021).

Limitations to this study include a small sample size, due to participants coming on a volunteer basis, and a lack of diversity within the sample size, as it was mainly comprised on white females. There was also a limitation surrounding feedback, as some feedback was extremely detailed, and some was more surface level. Lastly, participants felt that triggering discussion topics and body comparison to fellow group members may have stunted their ability to fully thrive in their recovery journey. This article offers great insight on the topic of support groups, specifically for those who may be recovering from an eating disorder, as social support and recovery go hand in hand, and from what was shown in this article support can come from both facilitators and peers (Waller et al., 2021).

In an article written by Jessica Koski, the author critically evaluated the processes necessary for group functioning and the sustainment of group member participation. For approximately 11 months, the author observed weekly support group meetings at a professional agency. Each group contained approximately 5-10 members and was facilitated by 2 professionally trained therapists. Although the facilitators were present to run the support group, the group was rather unstructured and participant led (Koski, 2014).

Through the time span of this observation, the author made special note of symbolic interactionism. Group members would share personal experiences, and from that other group members would gain the words to express their personal emotions and experiences. The limitations of this study include the absence of diversity in group participants, as eating disorders tend to affect females more than males. Group members shared concerns regarding attendance after recovery, as some do not see the need for recovered individuals to continue returning to group, yet facilitators put much emphasis on the importance of prolonged attendance and maintenance of the disorder (Koski, 2014).

This article provides important information regarding the demographics of the population most affected by eating disorders. White, middle class, females of all ages tend to be more affected than any other population. The identifiable cause of this is western culture, as the norms coming from this culture put pressure on body image and beauty standards. This article also offers information of participant feedback, as shown that participants prefer a more peer led group over facilitator led (Koski, 2014).

An article by Connor Strobel and Jayna Lennon examines what effect content moderation has on male participation in virtual eating disorder support groups. The study was conducted through 3 online platforms including Reddit, Tumblr, and an eating disorder recovery website. Each recovery platform had a different level of moderation, ranging from low to high. Observation was done anonymously, using a fake account that was used to join support groups and observe the interactions taking place between group members in various levels of moderation (Strobel et al., 2023).

The interpersonal theory was highlighted in this study, as observers reported seeing specific patterns of interaction between men and women participants in mildly moderated support groups. In mild moderation, men had enough space to take female feedback on recovery and masculinizes that feedback to meet the needs of their disorder. Men face unique challenges compared to women battling eating disorders, therefore in person groups tend to intimidate male participants. In a mildly moderated online support group, men had the comfort of protecting their personal identity and becoming more vulnerable (Strobel et al., 2023).

Limitations to this study include unrealistic expectations of male participation. Men tend to be less emotional than women, so it takes time for men to grow comfortable and share their experiences and emotions surrounding a female dominated health issue. Because of this, progress is made slower in recovering men than women. The theme of passive positivity was also reported

negatively in this article, as men reported receiving kindness and motivation that they felt was superficial or beating around the real issue at hand (Strobel et al., 2023).

This article gives information on the population of men struggling with eating disorders, a topic widely unstudied. This information will help shape future support groups, allowing facilitators to cater to the needs of male participants who may join. It is also clear that men are more likely to participate in virtual support groups than an in person one, as it allows for more vulnerability and less shame/embarrassment (Strobel et al., 2023).

An article by Keith Humphreys summarizes the major benefits of support groups by analyzing prior knowledge and research available on the topic. The main curiosity present in this research was how and why participant involvement affects peer group members. The article included support group benefits such as finding a sense of belonging and friendship, enhancing society, and improved coping mechanisms. In a society where people tend to keep to themselves and handle health issues in private, support groups influence peer support and relatability (Humphreys, 1997).

Narrative therapy was emphasized in this article, as it provides a framework for individuals to explore and reconstruct personal narratives. Narrative therapy is extremely prevalent in support groups, as participants interact with each other and in turn promote self-reflection within. Limitations of support groups include individual preference. Some people prefer different treatment methods for recovery such as medication or individualized therapy. Each individual's recovery needs are different, which is beneficial for facilitators to know. Even if a support group is not the right answer for all individuals recovering from a disorder or illness, it helps many others (Humphreys, 1997).

In the article *Trust and a sense of safety in the group: The benefits of professionally led support groups in eating disorders*, the authors analyze eight studies that focused on eating

disorders and the benefits of professionally led support groups. The purpose of this study was to determine if having a qualified facilitator leading the support group would make a larger impact on the group's recovery process. This study didn't identify a theoretical framework; however, the social constructionist theory could be applied because they observed behavior to determine proper structure for a support group.

Participant information is unknown due to there not being active participants. This study focused on four types of eating disorders including anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, and unspecified eating disorders. This study was a combination analysis of eight different studies about support groups, eating disorders, and professionally led (Waller et al., 2021, p.487). The studies included in this analysis utilized qualitative methods such as “interviews, surveys, case studies, and focus groups” (Waller et al., 2021, p.488). The literature seemed to have common themes. Many individuals felt safe in groups that were being facilitated by a professional. It also allowed people to create relationships and strengthen their support systems (Waller et al., 2021). The results of this study show that professional facilitators are a main factor in ensuring the quality of the support group (Waller et al., 2021). Social support is critical for an individual with an eating disorder and has been identified as “an integral part of the recovery process” (Waller et al., 2021, p.486).

The authors only utilized eight articles for this study, which is a limitation due to funding purposes (Waller et al., 2021). The severe symptoms that arise with an eating disorder causes concern for this population, and the treatment is often complex and expensive (Waller et al., 2021). The facilitators of a support group are often as important as the clients that participate. Support groups led by professionals are not terribly expensive to conduct (Waller et al., 2021). They have been shown to improve individuals coping abilities, a higher view of self, and better health outcomes (Waller et al., 2021, p.486).

In the article by Monaghan & Doyle, they state that anorexia nervosa begins for many during youth. This article focuses on how youth with anorexia nervosa experience support groups. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the emotions of youth who have anorexia nervosa and attended a post-meal support group. This study didn't identify a specific theoretical framework; however, they did utilize the social learning theory by allowing the individuals to observe and gather experiences from other people during the post-meal support group. This study focused on females who were between twelve and eighteen. The participants also were required to be diagnosed with anorexia nervosa and had recently been discharged from the hospital or inpatient treatment (Monaghan & Doyle, 2023, p.130). There were six participants for this study.

This study utilized post meal support groups as therapeutic interventions (Monaghan & Doyle, 2023). The researchers used qualitative methods to measure participants' responses to the support group. The group was facilitated by mental health professionals. They conducted interviews as their method for gathering data. To ensure accuracy of the data collection, the interviews were transcribed. They were able to divide the responses into three common themes. They focused on the difficulties of "mealtimes and post mealtimes", the benefits of the group, and the negative aspects of the group (Monaghan & Doyle, 2023, p.131).

Many of the participants stated that mealtimes and post-mealtimes were very difficult for them. However, some stated that when staff sat with them at lunch it helped them significantly (Monaghan & Doyle, 2023, p.131). Participants stated the group created a routine for them and allowed them to have social support. The participants reported that they would prefer for there to be more specific topics to be focused on (Monaghan & Doyle, 2023).

This study identified a few limitations. The interviewer could not conduct face-to-face interviews because it was during COVID-19. (Monaghan & Doyle, 2023). This study also had a

very small sample size. Although this study had limitations it provides a different perspective than other studies by specifically focusing on youth. Anorexia nervosa has a high risk of death. If there is more research on interventions for this population, it can be applied to future groups to better support these individuals. For individuals who cannot afford or access inpatient mealtime support groups in one's community can alleviate many barriers that people face.

The article *“Sharing Lived Experience”: Describing a Virtual Counselor-Facilitated LGBTQ+ Support Group for Disordered Eating* shines a light on how intersectionality can be utilized in eating disorder treatment. This study tried to determine if and how disordered eating support groups were beneficial for LGBTQ+ individuals. This group wanted to provide free services and in return get their feedback for the research. This study utilized the Minority Stress theory and heavily focused on intersectionality (Brownstone et al., 2023, p.10). This study was also utilizing a “liberation psychology framework” (Brownstone et al., 2023, p.9). There were twenty-seven participants. Each participant completed an online survey at the end of the group. The participants had to be eighteen years or older and speak English. The support group met every week for one hour on a virtual call. Quantitative and qualitative measures were utilized in this study.

The feedback of the support group from the participants consisted of gaining community, creating a safe space, intersectionality, hope, and implementation of skills (Brownstone et al., 2023). Many participants felt like they benefited from understanding how their identity may affect their disorder and the way they experience it.

More research is needed to understand the benefits of a disordered eating support group for LGBTQ+ youth. Many LGBTQ+ individuals are fearful of treatment for fear of being shamed and discriminated against. There is a lack of accessible treatment for LGBTQ+ youth with disordered eating, and this can alleviate that barrier (Brownstone et al., 2023, p.11). This group

was free to join, and many individuals were impacted by it. It is important to be reminded of intersectionality when making a support group for individuals who are struggling with eating disorders. Eating disorders can arise for very different reasons, every person's story is different. Eating disorder treatment needs to include intersectionality to benefit most people.

The article *Comparative Efficacy of Spirituality, Cognitive, and Emotional Support Groups for Treating Eating Disorder Inpatients* points out the benefits of social support and spirituality in treatment. Prior research has shown that spirituality may be beneficial in the treatment of eating disorders. These authors believe that it can be utilized in therapeutic situations and in treatments for many individuals (Richards et al., 2006, p.402). This study was comparing spiritual, cognitive and emotional support groups and their effectiveness for treating eating disorders.

This study had one hundred twenty-two women receiving inpatient treatment. The groups were conducted by a multidisciplinary staff with various mental and physical health professionals (Richards et al., 2006). The spirituality group received non-denominational readings about topics like grace and forgiveness (Richards et al., 2006). The cognitive group received a book regarding cognitive and behavioral techniques. The emotional support group was a discussion-based group where individuals got to choose their topic.

This group utilized tests such as “the Eating Attitudes Test, Body Shape Questionnaire, Outcome Questionnaire, Multidimensional Self-Esteem Inventory, and Spiritual Well-Being Scale” (Richards et al., 2006, p.406). Results from this study show that the spirituality support group saw many benefits regarding social role conflict and relationship distress. However, this study had a small sample size of participants and required more variation within the types of groups. Spirituality can be beneficial to many patients with eating disorders. This can be applied to groups of all kinds, and it can be looked at from the strength’s perspective, and the systems

theory. Recovery from eating disorders is a difficult journey, but understanding intersectionality could be beneficial for these individuals.

Research has proven that social support and understanding one's experience drastically improves recovery and treatment for individuals with an eating disorder. Many people with eating disorders suffer from isolation due to the competitive nature of their disorders. As research has shown support groups are beneficial for this population because they provide a sense of safety and empowerment knowing they have a community of people like them even if there are differences. Support groups also can meet the individuals where they are as they are, often in communities or accessible online.

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