



“Have I put on weight?” Excessive reassurance seeking in eating disorders: A potential maintenance mechanism and treatment target

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Introduction: Eating disorders (EDs) show high comorbidity with anxiety disorders and may share cognitive behavioural maintenance mechanisms. In anxiety disorders, safety behaviours such as excessive reassurance seeking (ERS) are known to maintain symptoms. Although ERS is frequently observed by clinicians in individuals with EDs, it has received little empirical attention and is not consistently targeted in current treatments. Targeting ERS may therefore present a promising avenue for improving treatment outcomes in EDs.

Aims: Using a mixed methods approach, this PhD project aims to examine ERS as a potential maintenance factor in EDs, to inform the development of a targeted treatment intervention, and to examine the effectiveness of this intervention in improving treatment outcomes.

Methods: This project consists of four interconnected studies. (1) A systematic review of the existing evidence on anxiety-based maintenance mechanisms in EDs. (2) A qualitative study exploring the triggers, functions, and consequences of ERS in EDs. (3) A questionnaire study will develop and evaluate a measure of ERS in EDs. Finally, (4) drawing on findings from the previous studies, an intervention study will develop and test a targeted module addressing ERS within CBT-ED using a multiple baseline single case experimental design. This project is embedded within a specialized ED service in Iceland where CBT-ED is routinely delivered.

Clinical implications: Understanding and targeting ERS may inform refinements to CBT-ED and

support more effective and individualized treatment interventions.

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