



Developing a care pathway for patients with Eating Disorders and complex emotional needs

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This service improvement project examined a subgroup of adults with eating disorders (ED) who present with co-occurring complex emotional needs (CEN) within a community ED service.

The study aimed to characterise this subgroup and inform the development of a more responsive care pathway.

A sequential mixed-methods design was employed across five stages: clinician survey, retrospective multidisciplinary team (MDT) data audit (2020–2024), clinician validation, comparison of clinical outcomes, and service user focus group.

Clinicians described this subgroup in terms of emotional dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, trauma history, and treatment non-response. MDT data indicated that 22.7% of cases were identified as ED-CEN, with increasing rates over time. Logistic regression and hierarchical cluster analysis identified four core domains: emotional dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, chronicity and risk, and social isolation. Clinician validation supported the relevance of these indicators. Compared to the general caseload, this subgroup reported significantly higher levels of eating disorder psychopathology, depression, and anxiety.

Service users highlighted the importance of relational safety, continuity of care, and access to longer-term, skills-based and integrative interventions beyond standard CBT-ED.

Findings suggest that a substantial subgroup of individuals with ED present with complex emotional and relational needs that are not adequately addressed by standard treatment pathways. A tailored, integrated care pathway incorporating CBT-ED with emotion-focused and relational approaches (e.g., DBT- and MBT-informed interventions) may improve engagement and outcomes. These findings have implications for service design and implementation in community ED settings.