



Experiences of Young People with Anorexia Nervosa and Parents Prior to Seeking Treatment: A Qualitative Interview Study.

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Introduction: Anorexia Nervosa (AN) typically emerges during adolescence, placing significant strain on family life. Despite the importance of early intervention, the pre-treatment phase remains poorly understood, particularly regarding its impact on family relationships. This study addresses this gap by exploring experiences of both young people (YP) and their parents.

Aim: To explore how young YP with AN and parents experience the period from before illness onset to treatment initiation, with a focus on perceived impacts on family life .

Methods: An exploratory qualitative study employing 15 interviews with YP (aged 13–17 years) and 20 interviews with parents analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results: Four themes were identified. Evolving Doubt captured parents' increasing uncertainty, from normalising early signs of AN to confusion about help seeking and managing healthcare related barriers.

Living an Ordinary and Busy Life before AN described family life before AN as structured and activity oriented, frequently framed by parents as “normal”.

From Trust to Tension reflected relational changes following AN onset, commonly marked by strain and emotional distance, though some families experienced increased closeness.

Making Sense of the Emergence of AN highlighted how parents and YP sought explanations, with parents drawing on broader interpretations and perceived vulnerabilities, while YP offered more concrete accounts related to body image or health

Discussion: Taken together, the four themes portray how family life develops from taken-for-granted normality and trusting relationships, through parental doubt and uncertainty, towards conflict and mistrust, and how participants strive to make sense of these changes.