

Eating Disorders – A Hidden Phenomenon in Outpatient Mental Health?

DEERFIELD, Ill. – October 17, 2013 – A new study confirms the previously held assumption that eating disorders are a hidden phenomenon in general outpatient mental health. Drs. Anthea Fursland and Hunna Watson from the Centre for Clinical Interventions (CCI) in Perth, Australia, screened for eating disorders in their Anxiety and Depression Program. The authors found the prevalence of disordered eating and diagnosable eating disorder was 18.5% and 7.3%, respectively. Study results published online in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, suggest that screening for eating disorders should be routinely included in all outpatient mental health settings.

The investigation revealed that the majority of people with eating disorders seen in outpatient mental health treatment facilities seem to go undetected. *“We know that eating disorders are more common than we thought, and they are not being recognized and treated,”* acknowledged lead author Fursland. Most patients do not seek treatment, and among those who do, the tendency is to present for help with co-morbid mental or physical illnesses such as anxiety and depression.

“We found that in an outpatient community mental health clinic where people were referred for anxiety and depression, 1 in 14 people had a current eating disorder, and that was in a program that also housed a specialist eating disorders treatment program. So one could imagine that in many outpatient mental health clinics, the rate might be higher,” says Fursland. The current findings therefore suggest that individuals with anxiety and depression are 1.54 times more likely to have an eating disorder than the general population. In addition, the study found that people who screened positive for an eating problem were female, younger, and more likely to have a history of self-harm.

This study provides evidence that eating disorders are a prevalent, but hidden problem in outpatient mental health. According to Fursland, *“There should be screening for eating disorders in **ALL** health facilities. Screening tools are quick to administer, can be easily built into routine intake practice, and may successfully identify treatment need.”*

The Academy for Eating Disorders is a global and trans-disciplinary professional organization with more than 1,500 members from 47 countries worldwide. AED provides educational resources and platforms for professional dialogue, training, and collaboration through its publications, including the International Journal of Eating Disorders, annual International Conference on Eating Disorders, clinical teaching days and other programs. Visit www.aedweb.org for more information.

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