Developing a Physiotherapy led physical activity and exercise pathway as part of a multidisciplinary treatment approach on an inpatient eating disorder unit

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Background and Aim

Ward S3 is a Specialist Adult Eating Disorder unit in Cambridge, where the emphasis is on multi-disciplinary working in the delivery of its treatment pathways. Treatment pathways include both a recovery pathway and harm minimisation pathway. As part of these pathways, the aim was to develop and include a Physical Activity and Exercise pathway, to support patients to work towards a healthy relationship with exercise and activity during their admission.

Evidence shows that if dysfunctional exercising behaviour is not addressed as part of eating disorder treatment, then risk of relapse is higher. Therefore, including management of dysfunctional exercise as part of multi-professional eating disorder treatment is essential in order to support development of a healthy relationship with exercise. Physiotherapy plays a key role in delivering this treatment as specialist exercise professionals, with “expertise in the body and the body in movement” (Probst, 2013).

Methodology

The pathway was developed through identification and formulation of key physiotherapy assessment and treatment interventions for supporting safe and appropriate movement, body awareness, activity and exercise, at different stages of an eating disorder and individual recovery. This was combined with key components of psycho-educational approaches relating to principles of healthy exercise engagement, and exercise prescription. As part of pathway development physiotherapy resources and exercise management worksheets were collated to develop a ‘managing exercise and activity workbook’ which provided a structure for psycho-educational and patient self-directed work in between practical and exploratory exercise and activity sessions. Reviews of the patient engagement in the pathway was included in multi-disciplinary meetings, patient reviews and care plan meetings.

Development of the physical activity and exercise pathway

- Understand the role of the physical activity and exercise pathway in the recovery process
- Understand the impact of the pathway on patients’ physical and psychological health
- Develop the pathway with the input of multiple stakeholders
- Educate patients and carers about the pathway
- Share the principles of healthy exercise and movement
- Develop strategies, approaches and interventions to challenge dysfunctional exercise
- Support education and advice to patients and carers as part of patient’s treatment & ongoing support
- To guide planning in response to data on relapse prevention & strategies to stay on track

Outcome

Development of the pathway now supports individualised physical, functional and behavioural assessment in relation to exercise and body movement. Through the inclusion of the pathway on the ward, as part of the treatment pathways, Physiotherapy assessments and treatments are used to support patients to explore and understand their relationship with exercise, to plan goals & develop strategies for activity & exercise management. Following multidisciplinary assessment of both physical and psychological risk, where appropriate, patients are supported to engage in supervised and adapted physical activity and exercise. This takes place alongside weight restoration and psycho-educational sessions relating to exercise, to ensure exercise engagement remained safe and appropriate. The pathway was also developed to include transitional work for community integration and longer-term exercise management. The pathway has now embedded within the multi-disciplinary treatment pathways on ward S3 and provides opportunity for continued review and progression of a patients exercise management along the pathway, as part of treatment and recovery.

Compulsive Exercise Test (CET) outcome measures were included within the pathway process, being completed by patients during their admission, and will provide opportunity for continued review and progression of a patients exercise management along the pathway, as part of treatment and recovery.

References:


Examples of feedback from patients who engaged in the pathway approach:

"Exercise was such a big thing for me when I first came in, and it had taken over my life so much. A big way I coped with everything. But it wasn’t a healthy way of coping at all, it was all consuming, compulsive and exhausting. I felt so stuck in it and needed to stop, but I didn’t know how. Then physiotherapy sessions helped guide me, keep me safe, and break the exercise cycle I was in.

When I first came in [exercise] had taken over my life so much. It was a big way in which I coped with everything but it wasn’t a healthy way to cope at all, it was all consuming, compulsive and exhausting. Then [Therapist] came along & guided me through each one of them, she helped me in my relationship with exercise, knowing I can stop, change, & do it because I want to not because I have to."

"The sessions gave me an opportunity to explore my existing relationship with exercise for what it was, not what I thought it was, and how it could re-create the relationship I would like with exercise."

"The theory enabled me to see and understand when and why the practical was introduced when it was, the impacts different exercise can have on my body and how to target and strengthen specific areas in a safe and controlled way."

"[Therapist] hasn’t just taught me about exercise but how to have more fun, face fewer restrictions, routines and punishment. Helping both my physical and internal strength to carry me through the next stage of this journey.”