

# Supportive Interventions in Managing Eating Disorders: A Review of the Evolving Medical Professional Landscape

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## ABSTRACT

**Background** • The landscape of healthcare for medical professionals is undergoing significant changes during a global rise in obesity and mental health issues, particularly in the context of eating disorders. The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with sedentary lifestyles and job loss, has exacerbated food obsession and mental health challenges, highlighting the need for effective treatments.

**Objective** • This review aims to explore the impact of supportive interventions in managing eating disorders within the evolving landscape of medical professionals' approaches, focusing on the adoption of new tools and approaches.

**Methods** • A comprehensive analysis of current literature and data sources was conducted to examine the healthcare landscape's transformation and its implications for treating eating disorders. Various treatment modalities, including therapy, education, medication, and support groups, were evaluated in light of recent changes in medical practice.

**Results** • The review identified a growing body of research highlighting the effectiveness of supportive interventions, such as cognitive behavior therapy, mindfulness, and participation in peer support groups in improving

emotional eating patterns and facilitating long-term weight management. The findings underscore the growing prevalence of obesity and mental health issues, with a significant portion of individuals experiencing food obsession and overeating. Despite this, recognition and treatment of obesity-related psychological issues remain inadequate, partly due to a shortage of mental health professionals. Treatment options for eating disorders may include bariatric surgery, therapy, education, medication, and supportive interventions. Support groups such as Overeaters Anonymous (OA) have shown promise in helping individuals manage eating disorders and achieve healthier lifestyles.

**Conclusions** • The shifting healthcare landscape necessitates a proactive approach from medical professionals to address the complex relationship between obesity, mental health, and eating disorders. Integrating peer support groups and holistic treatment approaches alongside traditional medical interventions can enhance outcomes and promote long-term weight management. (*Adv Mind Body Med.* 2024;38(1):15-19.)

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## INTRODUCTION

Healthcare providers worldwide have witnessed a significant rise in obesity and mental health conditions among patients of all demographics.<sup>1</sup> Individuals are struggling with food obsession alongside heightened mental health challenges resulting from pandemic-related stress, job displacement, and the widespread adoption of sedentary behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Regrettably, the technological conveniences aimed at modernizing lifestyles have paradoxically contributed to unprecedented levels of physical inactivity. The American Heart Association (AHA) reported an 83%

rise in individuals engaged in sedentary occupations, with this percentage steadily escalating.<sup>3</sup>

Although obesity can increase the risk of various health conditions, it does not always mean that individuals will have poor health overall. There exists a divergence of opinion among medical professionals regarding the classification of obesity as a disease, largely due to the limitations of relying solely on body mass index (BMI) measurements for diagnosis.<sup>4</sup> Athletes and weightlifters, for instance, may exhibit elevated BMI values without meeting the clinical criteria for obesity.<sup>4-5</sup> However, the prevalence of obesity is increasing, emphasizing the imperative for medical practitioners to accord it greater priority. It involves the creation of improved treatment methods and ensuring there are enough resources available to address the diverse needs of those affected.<sup>5-6</sup>

Obesity, along with the recognition of food obsession and overeating, often remains unacknowledged and untreated. According to the American Psychological Association (APA),

in March 2021, over 42% of Americans self-reported an average of approximately 30 pounds of excess weight.<sup>7</sup> Despite medical practitioners acknowledging that over half of their patients are obese due to psychological factors, their response has been hindered by a significant shortage of mental health professionals over the past five years.<sup>8</sup>

Mental health professionals express concern that if left unaddressed, this shortage could have significant and enduring impacts on patients, particularly affecting people of color due to the even more limited availability of practitioners serving marginalized communities.<sup>9</sup> The APA's 2022 COVID-19 Practitioner Impact Survey revealed that over 60% of psychologists reported having no openings for new patients, with 40% indicating that they had ten or more patients on their waitlist.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, this study was conducted to address the pressing need for a comprehensive understanding and effective management of eating disorders in the context of evolving healthcare landscapes and societal changes. The objective was to examine the impact of these changes on treatment modalities and patient outcomes, aiming to enhance the quality of care provided to individuals with eating disorders. Our study has the potential to inform healthcare professionals, policymakers, and stakeholders about the evolving challenges and opportunities in managing eating disorders, ultimately improving patient care and outcomes.

### THE TREATMENT ENVIRONMENT

Eating disorder treatments are tailored to address specific disorders and accompanying symptoms. Typically, they encompass a blend of psychological therapy (psychotherapy), nutrition education, medical monitoring, and, in some cases, medication intervention.<sup>10</sup> With the evolving landscape of medical practice, it is imperative to consider holistic approaches to treatment.<sup>11</sup>

#### Overeaters Anonymous (OA): Tailored Treatment Approach

Overeaters Anonymous (OA) is a non-profit organization offering free support to individuals with eating disorders and should be integrated into treatment plans.<sup>12</sup> Research suggests that structured interventions, such as those provided by OA, not only alleviate symptoms but also facilitate significant improvements in overall quality of life.<sup>13</sup> In a survey conducted among 5163 individuals struggling with overeating, participants reported substantial improvements in various aspects of their lives following engagement with OA.<sup>14</sup>

#### Impact of Overeaters Anonymous (OA) on Treatment Engagement and Support

It is noteworthy that prior to joining OA, 77% of participants had already received some form of treatment or counseling.<sup>14</sup> Among those who attended OA meetings, 30% were motivated to do so after learning about the benefits of the fellowship. Following their involvement with OA, individuals became more proactive in seeking further treatment or counseling for themselves. Remarkably, 67% of participants reported receiving additional forms of treatment or counseling,

**Figure 1.** Life Improvements Reported by Overeaters Anonymous (OA) Members

	Significant improvement	Moderate improvement	Total
Mental/emotional health	76%	18%	94%
Daily Functioning	72%	21%	93%
Spiritual connection	74%	18%	92%
Relationships	64%	24%	88%
Overall physical health	58%	26%	84%
Weight issues	53%	27%	80%

Note: Results depicted in Figure 1 are based on a survey conducted among attendees of Overeaters Anonymous (OA) meetings. The chart categorizes various aspects of life improvements reported by members, distinguishing between those deemed significant and those rated as moderate.

including medical, psychological, or spiritual support. Of these OA members, 88% acknowledged that the support provided by OA significantly complemented their existing treatment or counseling regimen, refer to Figure 1.<sup>14-15</sup>

#### Awareness and Availability of Overeaters Anonymous (OA) Among Medical Professionals

A survey conducted by Ripple Effect<sup>16</sup> within the medical practitioner community revealed a significant lack of awareness regarding OA and similar organizations. The majority of healthcare professionals were found to be uninformed about OA and were not inclined to offer these resources to their patients. Among the 67 respondents surveyed, only 12% had prior knowledge of OA and were familiar with its mission.<sup>16-17</sup>

#### Patient Perceptions and Barriers to Support Attendance

In a telephone survey conducted in late 2022 by Lauren Carey, RDN, along with Ninoska Peterson, PhD, and her colleague Andrea Rigby, PsyD, Med, MS, insights were gathered from 118 bariatric patients regarding their attitudes toward support.<sup>17</sup> Approximately 25% of respondents indicated that they would not participate in any form of support group due to feeling either too busy or intimidated. It is noteworthy that had these patients been informed about the effectiveness of organizations like OA, their apprehensions regarding intimidation or time constraints might have been alleviated.

#### Barriers for Overeaters Anonymous (OA)

For numerous individuals, the non-professional nature of OA serves as a benefit, as it operates as a self-supporting fellowship comprised of individuals who have either overcome or are in the process of overcoming compulsive eating. The primary aim of this fellowship is to facilitate the exchange of experiences among individuals struggling with compulsive eating, allowing them to share their personal journeys of recovery and maintenance.<sup>18</sup>

Regrettably, OA fellowships and other independent support groups remain largely unrecognized as valuable resources by healthcare professionals. However, the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery (ASMBS) has taken proactive measures by advocating for bariatric support programs on a bi-monthly basis. It is essential for medical staff to actively refer their patients to organizations that offer free participation on a regular basis, ensuring access to vital support services.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, statistics indicate that 56.4% of individuals struggling with compulsive eating refrain from seeking treatment due to several factors, including the stigma surrounding overeating, limited education on effective interventions, reluctance to undergo diagnosis, and challenges in accessing care.<sup>18</sup> Over the past decade, securing insurance coverage for compulsive eating interventions has been an ongoing struggle, underscoring the significance of OA in overcoming this barrier, given its cost-free accessibility and absence of healthcare prerequisites.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, research from the AHA underscores the beneficial effects of peer interaction in mitigating obesity, enhancing weight loss efforts, and sustaining weight loss.<sup>3</sup>

### IMPACT OF PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

Peer-to-peer support plays a significant role in weight management, potentially leading to reductions in BMI. This association results from the ability of peers to customize weight management interventions according to the unique needs of individuals grappling with overweight issues.<sup>5-6</sup> Peers possess firsthand experience with compulsive eating, enabling them to empathize with and relate to others facing similar challenges. This personal connection distinguishes peer support from conventional medical interventions, as medical professionals may lack the same level of shared experience.<sup>6</sup>

#### Importance of Peer Support in Addressing Eating Disorder

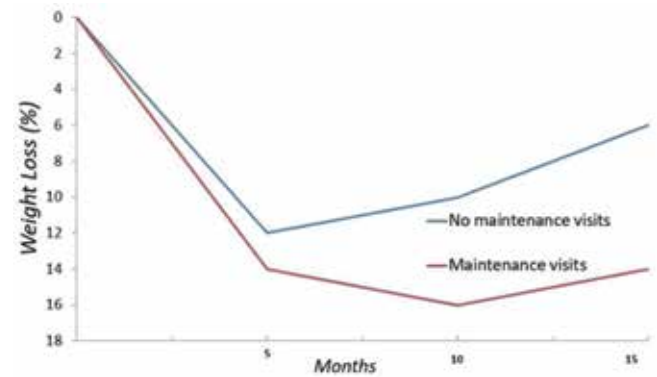
Furthermore, individuals receiving peer support, especially those with similar socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, often benefit from a deeper understanding of the emotional challenges associated with obesity and compulsive eating. Unlike healthcare practitioners, peers can offer empathetic support rooted in shared experiences, fostering a sense of understanding and camaraderie. This type of support is particularly valuable in situations where ongoing professional assistance may be financially prohibitive. Participants report feeling more attended to and understood by their peers, highlighting the unique advantages of peer-based interventions.<sup>6</sup>

#### Affordability of Supportive Resources

Considering the challenges associated with accessing ongoing professional help due to affordability constraints, the availability of free-to-participate organizations such as OA presents a valuable resource for health practitioners and their patients. Recent observations suggest that peer-to-peer interactions within such organizations often offer more meaningful support, aiding individuals in overcoming emotional struggles related to food addiction. Consequently, this supportive environment encourages individuals to take proactive steps towards weight management, thereby contributing to reductions in both weight and BMI.<sup>14-17</sup>

Recent studies<sup>6</sup> have demonstrated a modest but notable enhancement in weight loss outcomes among individuals receiving peer support compared to those undergoing conventional treatment approaches. A meta-analysis reveals a mean decrease in weight of 0.78 kg and a significant

**Figure 2.** Long-Term Weight Loss Maintenance in Weight Management Programs (Adapted from Perri et al. 1988)



Note: The red curve represents weight management programs that incorporate weight loss maintenance strategies, while the blue curve depicts programs without maintenance visits.

reduction in BMI by 0.16 kg/m<sup>2</sup>, on average, in cohorts benefiting from peer support interventions.<sup>6</sup>

#### OA's Twelve-Step Program

Healthcare practitioners recognize the versatility of OA as a therapeutic approach, adaptable to the specific needs of each individual. Some practitioners incorporate OA as a component within a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary treatment regimen, while others utilize it as either an adjunct or standalone therapy. The utilization of OA's twelve-step program, in combination with regular group meetings, has proven instrumental in assisting bariatric patients in weight maintenance. This holistic approach, rooted in a comprehensive disease model and recovery philosophy, operates within a drug-free therapeutic environment.<sup>19</sup> Numerous studies examining eating and addiction disorders have consistently reaffirmed the efficacy of this treatment paradigm.<sup>6,19</sup>

### LONG-TERM BEHAVIORAL CHANGES AND EATING DISORDER MANAGEMENT

Kevin et al.<sup>19</sup> underscore the critical necessity for sustained behavioral modifications in any weight management strategy. Even the most effective interim interventions are unlikely to yield enduring positive outcomes without adequate ongoing support and intervention.

#### Importance of Long-term Intervention

Numerous studies<sup>19,20</sup> indicate that continued engagement with healthcare providers or participation in group-based interventions can significantly enhance weight maintenance and long-term treatment success, in contrast to short-term approaches. As depicted in Figure 2, ongoing support plays a pivotal role in sustaining weight loss achievements.

#### Adoption of Long-term Intervention by OA and Similar Organizations

Several organizations, such as OA, recognize the significance of adopting a comprehensive, long-term

intervention approach. This approach aligns with established obesity treatment guidelines, advocating for sustained interventions lasting a minimum of 12 months to effectively manage weight loss and maintenance.<sup>15</sup>

### **Ongoing Support**

Sustained weight loss often necessitates continuous support and interaction rather than relying solely on individual efforts. Ongoing support from healthcare providers is critically important in managing compulsive eating and achieving long-term lifestyle changes. Instead of expecting individuals struggling with compulsive eating to navigate their challenges alone, primary physicians should take proactive measures to provide consistent guidance and support. Engaging with patients more intensively and regularly can significantly enhance their chances of success in achieving healthier lifestyles.<sup>6</sup>

Primary care physicians may face constraints in offering comprehensive support due to time constraints and limitations imposed by healthcare systems. Despite these challenges, it is crucial to prioritize patient care by exploring alternative options, such as referrals to obesity medicine specialists, registered dietitians, or free resources like OA. Ensuring ongoing support and intervention from healthcare providers is essential for individuals seeking to overcome compulsive eating and achieve sustainable weight loss. By adopting a proactive approach and leveraging available resources, healthcare professionals can play a pivotal role in guiding patients towards healthier lifestyle choices.<sup>21</sup>

## **COMBATTING THE EATING DISORDER AND GLOBAL OBESITY CRISIS**

### **Addressing the Treatment Gap**

Approximately 2.8 million people die annually from complications arising from excessive weight or obesity.<sup>23</sup> Obesity contributes to 5% of global deaths among the staggering 750 million individuals grappling with this condition. Despite the prevalence, a staggering 42% of adults dealing with obesity remain untreated.<sup>24</sup> The American Medical Association's 2013 recognition of obesity as a multifaceted chronic disease underscores the severity of the issue.<sup>22</sup>

However, the stark reality reveals that merely 2% of individuals afflicted with obesity receive formal treatment. Instead, the burden falls largely on individuals to self-manage their condition through dietary restrictions, exercise regimens, and lifestyle modifications. As Zachary Ward, an analyst at Harvard Chan School's Center for Health Decision Science, emphasizes, with obesity projected to affect nearly half of the US population by 2030, prevention emerges as a crucial strategy for tackling this epidemic.<sup>23</sup>

### **Addressing the Environmental and Societal Factors Contributing to Obesity**

In today's society, an alarming trend reveals an increased consumption of energy-dense foods characterized by high fat and sugar content. This dietary shift is compounded by a decline in physical activity, attributed to the sedentary nature

of modern work environments, the prevalence of conveniences facilitated by technological advancements, and a shift towards transportation over walking. These lifestyle changes, as highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO), are further exacerbated by urbanization trends. The collective impact of these environmental and societal shifts, coupled with inadequate healthcare policies addressing the obesity epidemic, underscores the severity of the issue.<sup>25</sup>

### **Need Advancements in Weight Management Research**

Recent studies in the field of weight management are expanding, providing valuable insights into the treatment of compulsive eating and obesity, along with associated conditions. For example, a study<sup>26</sup> conducted in 2023 demonstrated that medications designed for weight management are proving effective in reducing the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and cardiovascular-related deaths by 20%. We anticipate significant advancements in the pharmaceutical treatment of obesity over the next decade. By 2024, several new medications are expected to receive approval for weight loss interventions.<sup>27</sup>

A recent clinical trial<sup>28</sup> involving 2500 individuals grappling with obesity, compulsive eating, and overweight conditions revealed promising outcomes. Participants administered with the experimental drug over 16 months experienced weight reductions ranging from 15 to 20%. Continued advancements in weight management research are imperative to address the escalating global obesity crisis. These efforts are essential for developing more effective treatments and interventions to combat obesity and its associated health risks.

### **Advancing Policy and Treatment Accessibility**

With the forthcoming release of numerous weight loss medications, policy changes in health insurance coverage will also be needed to broaden access to treatment options. Initiatives such as the bipartisan effort to introduce Medicare coverage for obesity and compulsive eating treatment in the U.S. signify a shift towards greater accessibility to medications and therapies, highlighting the growing need for emotional support alongside medical interventions.<sup>29</sup>

### **Psychological Interventions**

Evidence suggests that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), dietary modifications, exercise, and mindfulness techniques are effective in addressing emotional eating, uncontrolled eating (external eating), and cognitive restraint (restrained eating). The OA fellowship is recognized for its spirituality-based interventions. In a study<sup>30</sup> focusing on weight-loss interventions targeting emotional eating in adults with high body mass indexes over a one-year trajectory, findings indicated that mindfulness interventions were more effective than a combination of CBT and dietary and/or exercise interventions.

### **Recognizing the Emotional Component of Weight Loss**

Diets frequently fail due to a lack of concurrent support groups or fellowships that address the emotional aspects of

food consumption. Dr. Diane Robinson, a neuropsychologist and Program Director of Integrative Medicine at Orlando Health, emphasizes the overlooked emotional component of weight loss efforts. Integrating emotional support alongside traditional dietary and exercise regimens is crucial for sustainable weight management success.<sup>31</sup>

### Study Limitations

It is important to recognize certain limitations inherent in the discussion. Firstly, the absence of empirical evidence from large-scale studies or clinical trials to substantiate claims regarding the efficacy of certain interventions may undermine the robustness of the conclusions. Furthermore, the scope of the discussion primarily revolves around the emotional component of weight loss, potentially overlooking other factors contributing to the complex phenomenon. Future research should aim to address these limitations by incorporating diverse perspectives, empirical evidence, and a broader examination of the multifaceted nature of eating disorders and weight management.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the studies and surveys discussed in this article underscore the significance of addressing the emotional aspect of eating and reframing food as nourishment rather than a reward or coping mechanism. Our finding emphasizes the importance of integrating support groups like Overeaters Anonymous or psychological assistance into weight loss strategies alongside physical interventions like exercise. Healthcare practitioners recognize the need for proactive education on emotional management, stress, and anxiety among patients. Understanding the powerful link between emotions and food can empower individuals to make conscious dietary changes.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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None.

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