The experience of eating disorder symptoms.

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Introduction: Eating disorders, but particularly anorexia nervosa, have been considered ‘ego-syntonic’ in that people often believe that their behaviours fit with their sense of who they are. This can make eating difficulties hard to treat, as individuals may be reluctant to give up the eating disorder lifestyles. There is research on how people make sense of eating difficulties, but this has been focused on discrete diagnostic populations (i.e. either anorexia or bulimia nervosa). However, some consideration has been given to the similarities between the eating disorders, and the potential of conceptualising them as one disorder with different variations (e.g. dietary restriction, binging, purging etc). Therefore the research explored how young people with restrictive, binging, and purging experiences understand their eating difficulties.

Method: Eight women aged 18-29 with eating difficulties were interviewed to discuss their eating experiences. Interview transcripts were analysed with interpretative phenomenological analysis in an effort to identify common themes in their experiences and how they made sense of these.

Findings: Five overarching themes were identified: the experience of the eating disorder as functional; gradual development of eating disorder symptoms; a cycle of eating disorder symptoms; negative effects of the eating disorder; ambivalence towards the eating disorder.

Discussion: It appeared that participants were aware of both negative and positive aspects of their eating difficulties, and as such, expressed ambivalence in their attitude towards recovery. Several felt that the eating difficulties appeared to provide some form of purpose, in that they were able to accomplish something – especially in regard to the restrictive aspects. However, participants also discussed how much they disliked elements of the eating difficulties, especially the negative impact upon them and those around them, and appeared keen to reject the binging experiences. Exploring aspects such as these in therapeutic work with individuals with eating disorders may help people to understand the role of eating problems in their lives, and consider how they may be able to incorporate other sources of meaning.

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