



## **‘Hit and Miss’: Experiences with Healthcare Professionals**

Beat conducted a survey from 16<sup>th</sup> September 2021 - 11<sup>th</sup> October 2021 on experiences of people with an eating disorder of seeking help from healthcare professionals.

### **What did we find in 2017?**

A 2017 review of medical training relating to eating disorders found undergraduate and postgraduate eating disorder training to be minimal in the UK (1). Five years ago, we ran a survey of nearly 1,700 people, which sought to better understand the kinds of experiences that people with eating disorders have when seeking help from their GPs (3). The findings of this survey described support for an eating disorder from a GP as a ‘lottery’. Only 42% of people with an eating disorder felt their GP understood eating disorders, and only 34% believed that their GP knew how to help them with their eating disorder.

### **Five years on, what has changed?**

In 2021, ahead of Eating Disorder Awareness Week (EDAW) 2022, we ran a similar survey to understand the lived experiences of people who have had eating disorders in seeking help and accessing treatment. This time, however, we extended it to include experiences with all healthcare professionals (not just GPs) and included a section on whether people felt there were missed opportunities for early intervention. We also focused this survey on people with lived experiences of having had an eating disorder themselves, rather than families or carers.

**The following is a summary of the results we found from participants in Wales.**

### **In Wales**

When we asked survey participants to focus on the **first time they had sought help** from a GP, 68 participants reported that their GP was located in Wales. Of these participants:

- 58% felt that their GP did not understand eating disorders
- 76% felt their GP did not know how to help them with their eating disorder
- 90% felt that their GP would benefit from more eating disorder training
- 66% felt their quality of care was ‘poor’

A positive experience with a GP or healthcare professional can make a real difference. But many are not well equipped to support people with eating



disorders. The survey results showed a broad range of patient experiences, ranging from very positive to very negative:

- *'I wonder if that first GP had listened, rather than rush me out his surgery because he was running behind, things might have been different.'*
- *'My GP was fundamental in getting me to accept specialist help and likely saved my life. She went above and beyond to make sure I got the help I needed and wouldn't settle for me initially being fobbed off by the specialist eating disorder service.'*
- *'Professionals often left it unnoticed and when [my] parents spoke [to] the GP, he was in denial and said it was a phase.'*
- *'When I first went to gp non[e] of them understood just passed from person to person! The gp I have now is amazing so helpful and understanding'*
- *'My GP said he didn't know about BINGE EATING DISORDER, I provided him with the GP pack from BEAT.'*
- *'They said that I'd grow out of it and they kept repeating that as I got older.'*
- *'I felt completely dismissed, I was told that I was jus[t] "small" and that I should try to snack more.'*

'Help seeking can be incredibly difficult for someone with an eating disorder. One person who had sought help from a GP in Wales told us that they didn't seek help sooner because *'I didn't feel sick enough to receive help'*. Others told us they would have sought help sooner if GPs had *'more knowledge and understanding of eating disorders'* or if *'doctors [would] stop being fatphobic.'*

Our GPs want to provide the best quality care for people with eating disorders. Yet the average GP receives less than two hours of training on eating disorders in their entire medical degree (1). A fifth of UK medical schools don't provide any training on eating disorders at all (1). Lack of eating disorder training has delayed access to treatment for years, and leads to devastating, and even fatal, consequences (4,5).

We are calling for UK medical schools to offer proper training on eating disorders. Eating disorder training should build awareness and knowledge of eating disorders (e.g. knowledge of how to spot the signs of an eating disorder, common comorbidities and the importance of early intervention) and practical skills (e.g. risk assessment, examination and communications skills) to support people with



eating disorders. We need our future GPs to be equipped with the knowledge and understanding they need to support their patients.

## References

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- (2) Le Grange, D., & Loeb, K. L. (2007). Early identification and treatment of eating disorders: prodrome to syndrome. *Early intervention in psychiatry*, 1(1), 27-39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-7893.2007.00007.x>
- (3) Beat. (2017). *Early Intervention on Eating Disorders: The Crucial Role of GPs*. <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/about-beat/policy-work/policy-and-best-practice-reports/early-intervention-on-eating-disorders-the-crucial-role-of-gps/>
- (4) Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (2017, December). *Ignoring the alarms: how NHS eating disorder services are failing patients*. <https://www.ombudsman.org.uk/publications/ignoring-alarms-how-nhs-eating-disorder-services-are-failing-patients>
- (5) Horstead, Sean. (2021, March). *Report to Prevent Future Deaths*. <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Averil-Hart-2021-0058-Redacted.pdf>