

# The role of occupational therapy within eating disorder treatment food-related activities

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## The need:

- Eating disorders are “**disabling, deadly and costly mental disorders**” (Treasure *et al.*, 2020, p.899), affecting **1.25 million people** (BEAT, 2021), with the **highest mortality rate compared to any other mental illness** (Treasure, Claudino and Zucker, 2010).
- The aetiology of eating disorders are multifactorial and complex; thus, treatment is required to be equally complex.
- The target of treatment is to restore weight, but weight gain alone is insufficient to achieve full long-term recovery (Rance, Moller and Clare, 2017). There have been calls for novel treatments (Brockmeyer *et al.*, 2017), “fresh perspectives” (Botha, 2015, p. 328), new service models (Munro *et al.*, 2014), and a “new paradigm” (Touyz and Hay, 2015, p. 1) to conceptualise, research and develop effective interventions for eating disorders.
- As recommended key members in multi-disciplinary treatment, occupational therapists can support recovery from eating disorders (Clark and Nayar, 2012). However, occupational therapists make up only a small-fraction of the workforce (Devery, Scanlan and Ross, 2018), considered “diverse” (Clewes and Kirkwood, 2016), with a lack of research to articulate their role (Sørliie *et al.*, 2020).
- Food-related activities are a novel intervention in eating disorder treatment, often led by occupational therapists, which can support skill transference into everyday life (Lock *et al.*, 2012; Biddiscombe *et al.*, 2018).

## Exploring meaning

- Our occupations provide us with roles, routines, structure and define our identity (Christiansen, 1999). They provide us with **meaning** (Ikiugu and Pollard, 2015).
- Meaning is a key constituent of occupation and experiencing meaning in occupation is believed to be a crucial component in mental health illness recovery (Blank, Harries and Reynolds, 2015).
- Engagement in eating disorder associated occupations have been identified as providing an all-consuming sense of meaning (Elliot, 2012; Dark and Carter, 2019). These valued meanings are believed to contribute to the maintenance of eating disorders (Fox, Larkin and Leung, 2015), appearing to be a friend, offering safety, protection and identity (Lavis, 2018; Conti *et al.*, 2020).
- Twinley’s (2013, 2021) concept, the dark side of occupation is a pertinent concept concerning anorexia, as eating disorder occupations can be simultaneously highly destructive yet meaningful and purposeful. Considering this in practice can create an “authentic dialogue about... lived experience” (Cowan and Sørliie, 2021, p. 166).
- There have been calls to explore the complexity of occupational meaning in eating disorders to support recovery (Gogarty and Brangan, 2004; Elliot, 2012).
- “Food-related occupations are a particularly rich arena for studying occupational meaning” (Beagan and D’Sylva, 2011, p. 210).

## The challenge:

Despite the psychological and emotional aspects of the illness, treatment experiences have been criticised as over-focalised upon physical restoration (Offord *et al.*, 2006; Joyce *et al.*, 2019).

Occupational therapists are among the professionals to address food-related activities within the context of treatment. The frame of reference used by occupational therapy in eating disorders is variable, and diluted, due to the lack of evidence base to draw from, which as a result, leaves occupational therapy generalising from other profession’s research (Devery *et al.*, 2018; Henderson, 1999).

Dating back to 1986, McColl, Friedland and Kerr, reported that “doing is not enough” (p.144) and encouraged occupational therapists to explore the underlying meanings of activities. Little is understood around the phenomenological and subjective meanings of food and eating practices beyond weight gain and functional improvements.

As occupational therapists are believed to be **meaning curators** (Hasselkus, 2011), it is vital to increase understanding of how individuals subjectively experience meaning.

## My research

The aim of my doctoral research is to explore the complexity of meaning of food and eating from the perspective of those with lived experience of anorexia using interpretative phenomenological methodology. Data will be collected through interviews and using photo-elicitation methods to understand experiences of food activities in treatment and relationships and interactions with food on a day-to-day basis.

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