



Stills from an animation created as part of the RHED-C project

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## Research highlights urgent need for national strategy to combat rising eating disorders

**The increasing number of people with eating disorders and a lack of national guidance for support teams has led to researchers calling for a new national strategy that includes specific guidance to support the remote delivery of eating disorder services.**

A [paper](#) led by academics at Northumbria University, published in the Journal of Eating Disorders today (27 March), points to figures outlining the scale of

the challenges and increasing numbers of people impacted:

- Approximately [1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder](#)
- 12.5% of 17 to 19-year-olds in England [reported](#) having an eating disorder in 2023, compared with 0.8% in 2017
- The financial cost of eating disorders to the English economy was [estimated as £8 billion in 2020](#)

The paper states that, in addition to increasing numbers, the lack of national guidance, ad hoc data collection, and inconsistencies in both quality of care and evaluation of service provision are leading to disparities in support provided to people with eating disorders across England. This has led to calls from activists, politicians and the Health and Social Care Committee for the Government to implement a national eating disorder strategy for England.

These calls have been echoed by the researchers who have been leading a three-year project investigating the impact of the rapid transition to remote care during the Covid-19 pandemic on people with eating disorders.

The [RHED-C project](#), led by [Dr Dawn Branley-Bell](#), Associate Professor and Director of the Psychology and Communication Technology Lab (PaCT Lab) at Northumbria, is funded by the Medical Research Foundation.

The team conducted interactive workshops, one-to-one interviews, and a UK-wide survey with people with lived experience of eating disorders, as well as engaging with service providers. They explored the benefits and challenges of receiving and providing online healthcare for those with eating disorders and eating distress. Based on their findings, they identified future support recommendations.

The researchers report that while eating disorders have featured in multiple broader healthcare plans, policies and reports, currently, there is no clear national strategy specifically for eating disorder services in England. Such strategies and frameworks already exist in other nations, including in Australia, and closer to home in Wales and Scotland.

Now, building on the [findings of their research](#), academics working on the RHED-C project are calling for a dedicated national eating disorder strategy for England, and emphasised the importance of incorporating evidence-based guidelines specific to the remote delivery of eating disorder services.

Dr Dawn Branley-Bell said: “Our research highlights the urgent need for a dedicated national strategy to address the rising prevalence of eating disorders in England. While remote healthcare has provided vital access to support, it also presents unique challenges that must be addressed through clear, evidence-based, eating disorder-specific guidelines.

“Without national coordination, inconsistencies in care will persist, leaving many individuals without the support they need. A comprehensive strategy, including specific guidance for remote service delivery for eating disorders, is essential to ensure equitable, high-quality care.”

In the absence of specific guidance for remote delivery of eating disorders services and to enhance online support experiences, the RHED-C team has developed a free online toolkit. The [ConnectED on the Journey toolkit](#) offers guidance for individuals with lived experiences, their families and friends, and service providers, aiming to improve the effectiveness of online support for eating disorders.

James Downs, a co-author on the paper who has lived experience of eating disorders, said: “Having contributed to policy and research in eating disorders as a patient, I’ve experienced first-hand the ways in which a fragmented and outdated approach to treatment leads to disparities in care and limits opportunities for recovery. The need for a national strategy for eating disorders is clear, and this should be co-created to reflect the priorities and needs of patients and their supporters.”

Dr Angela Hind, CEO of the Medical Research Foundation, said: “Eating disorders are complex, often life-threatening conditions affecting people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. In the UK, the scale of the problem is rising, with more young people than ever before receiving treatment for an eating disorder. Despite this, research remains significantly underfunded, meaning that understanding of how eating disorders arise and how to best treat them is still very limited. That’s why we’re continuing to prioritise research in this area, funding projects like RHED-C, to deepen understanding and improve care. By investing in cutting-edge research, we aim to generate

the evidence needed to make a meaningful difference for people affected by eating disorders.”

Find out more about the [RHED-C programme](#) on the project website, or watch the Medical Research Foundation's interview with Dr Dawn Branley-Bell:



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

The [paper](#), authored by [Richard Brown](#), [Claire Murphy-Morgan](#), [James Downs](#), and [Dr Dawn Branley-Bell](#), and titled ‘A Call for Strategy on Eating Disorders: The Need for a Comprehensive Eating Disorder Strategy in England and Specific Guidance for the Remote Delivery of Eating Disorder Services’, is available to view online in the Journal for Eating Disorders: [doi.org/10.1186/s40337-025-01224-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-025-01224-y)

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Notes to editors:

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Our mission is to lay the foundations for ground-breaking new discoveries and life-changing advances.

We give hope to people whose health conditions are overlooked, by

supporting research in areas that are underfunded.

Over the years, we've [supported cutting-edge research](#) into eating disorders, self-harm, antimicrobial resistance, hepatitis, pain, and so much more.

But to improve health for everyone, much more research is needed.

Right now, we're focusing our efforts on improving the lives of children and young people; addressing neglected areas of mental health; tackling the health impacts of climate change; and responding to emerging health threats.

[Visit our website to find out more.](#)

This RHED-C project, and the Medical Research Foundation's previous investments in [eating disorders](#) and [self-harm](#) research, have been made possible by a gift in Will from Catherine Evans.

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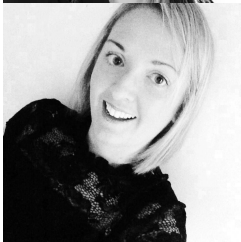
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