

Emotional Processing Difficulties in Recovered Anorexia Nervosa Patients: State or Trait

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Abstract : Objective: There is a dearth of research investigating the long-term emotional functioning of individuals recovered from anorexia nervosa (AN). This 15-year longitudinal study aimed to examine whether difficulties in cognitive processing of emotions persisted after long-term AN recovery and its link to anxiety and depression. Method: Twenty-four females, who were tested longitudinally during their acute and recovered AN phases, and 24 healthy control (HC) women, were screened for anxiety, depression, alexithymia, and emotion regulation difficulties (ER; only assessed in recovery phase). Results: Anxiety, depression, and alexithymia levels decreased significantly with AN recovery. However, scores on anxiety and difficulty in identifying feelings (alexithymia factor) remained high when compared to the HC group. Scores on emotion regulation difficulties were also lower in HC group. The abovementioned differences between AN recovered group and HC group in difficulties in identifying and accepting feelings and lack of emotional clarity were no longer present when the effect of anxiety and depression was controlled. Conclusions: Findings suggest that emotional dysfunction tends to decrease in AN recovered phase. However, using an HC group as a reference, we conclude that several emotional difficulties are still increased after long-term AN recovery, in particular, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, and difficulty controlling impulses and engaging in goal-directed behavior, thus suggesting to be a trait vulnerability. In turn, competencies related to emotional clarity and acceptance of emotional responses seem to be state-dependent phenomena linked to anxiety and depression. In sum, managing emotions remains a challenge for individuals recovered from AN. Under this circumstance, maladaptive eating behavior can serve as an affect regulatory function, increasing the risk of relapse. Emotional education and stabilization of depressive and anxious symptomatology after recovery emerge as an important avenue to protect from long-term AN relapse.

Keywords : alexithymia, anorexia nervosa, emotion recognition, emotion regulation

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