Exploring the relationships between disordered eating and mental health in women attending residential treatment for substance abuse

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Introduction and Aims: Women with substance use disorders (SUD) commonly report eating disorder (ED) symptoms along with high relapse and poorer mental health. Yet, little is known about the prevalence of eating disorder symptoms of women in treatment for SUD in Australia. The aim of this study was to explore the likely prevalence of eating disorder symptoms among women in Australian residential substance abuse treatment centres. It further aims to examine the relationship of ED with past trauma and comorbidity with other mental health problems.

Design and Methods: Participants were 1415 women attending residential treatment for alcohol and other drugs in Australia between 2008 and 2017. Data were collected within 7 days of admission using items from the Eating Disorders Screen for Primary care (ESP), Depression Anxiety Stress Scales and Addiction Severity Index.

Key Findings: Findings indicated nearly 60\% of women experienced eating disorder symptoms. These women were more likely to have overnight hospitalisation, been medicated by a health carer in the past 30 days, and to report a history of lifetime sexual and/or physical abuse than women with a negative screening. Furthermore, women with positive screen also reported significantly poorer mental health.

Discussions and Conclusions: Eating disorder symptoms are common among women in substance use treatment centres. Given the risks of relapse are greater with the presence of both disorders it is critical that eating disorders are treated concurrently with drug and alcohol treatment. Strategies to improve service provision in this area are described.

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