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Animation explores experiences of receiving online support for eating disorders

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many healthcare services were transitioned to run remotely - for example via video calls - creating challenges, particularly for those with eating disorders or eating distress. Through creative workshops, academics from Northumbria University collaborated with people who have experienced receiving this support, to translate these challenges into an animation and help health service providers understand individual experiences and improve remote patient care.

Academics from [Northumbria's Psychology and Communication Technology Lab](#) (PaCT Lab) are undertaking a three-year research programme titled, [Remote Healthcare for Eating Disorders throughout COVID-19](#) (RHED-C) funded by the [Medical Research Foundation](#).

The programme explores the benefits and challenges of receiving and/or providing online healthcare for eating disorders and eating distress and identifies future support recommendations.

Eating distress is a broad term that describes any relationship with food, weight, shape or eating that someone finds distressing. Some people who experience eating distress are diagnosed with an eating disorder.

The remote support experienced by those with these conditions is the focus of a powerful new animation, co-created by the team at Northumbria University and local charity, [Eating Distress North East](#) (EDNE). The animation raises awareness of the benefits and challenges of remote support for eating distress throughout the pandemic and was produced to help reduce the associated stigma, which is known to prevent people from seeking the support they need.

Part of the wider RHED-C project, the animation has been developed in collaboration with people who received such support from eating disorder charities across the region. They were invited to creative workshops which were delivered by the PaCT Lab team at Northumbria, as well as a local artist who has also experienced eating distress, and Northumbria University researcher from the Centre for Digital Citizens Dr Henry Collingham, with Senior Research Assistant on the project Claire Murphy-Morgan.

Participants were encouraged to use creative methods such as painting to share their experiences during the pandemic. The artwork and discussions from these workshops were then [translated into an animation](#) - forming the visuals and script, including voiceovers from the workshop participants.



The outcome of the workshops highlighted an obvious benefit of remote healthcare - the convenience of accessing support from home. But they also unveiled challenges which have been relatively overlooked. Poor internet connection made for disjointed sessions and patients often dealt with feelings of anxiety triggered by seeing themselves on camera during a video call.

Working with people who have first-hand experience of both receiving and providing online support, the workshops have enabled Northumbria researchers to identify what the future of remote support might look like and to co-design tools and interventions to promote more effective and accessible support.

Later this year, the team hopes to share a free online toolkit aimed at healthcare providers, as well as people looking for online support including carers and families. It will provide advice and resources designed to improve the online support experience.



Dr Dawn Branley-Bell, Director of the Psychology and Communication Technology Lab at Northumbria University

The RHED-C project is led by [Dr Dawn Branley-Bell](#), Associate Professor of Cyberpsychology and Director of the Psychology and Communication Technology Lab at Northumbria University. She said: “The RHED-C project is critical in understanding the experiences of people with eating disorders and most importantly, learning from these experiences to improve future support.

“Remote support for eating disorders has the potential to provide inclusive, effective, and supportive care, and through RHED-C, we aim to develop practical solutions to promote this.”

Anne Fry, Chief Executive at Eating Distress North East said: “Working with the RHED-C team has been a valuable experience in ensuring the voices of people living with eating distress are listened to. The research team worked hard to include people and make it possible for them to contribute, using creative and engaging methods. The experiences highlighted through this work can help us all reflect on our practice and work to make accessing services for eating distress easier for everyone.”

A world premiere of the animation, and an accompanying short documentary about how it was made, took place at the prestigious Computer Human Interaction (CHI) conference in Honolulu, Hawaii last month, where it was named one of the Top 3 Best Films.

Find out more about the [RHED-C programme](#) and the [research findings published by Frontiers in Psychiatry](#).

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