

# Considering the role of physical therapists within the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with eating disorders: a survey of expert clinicians

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**Considering the role of physical therapists within the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with eating disorders: an International survey of expert clinicians**

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Keywords:	Mental health, Physiotherapy, Exercise, Rehabilitation services
Abstract:	<p>Purpose Recent research has demonstrated that physical therapy may benefit the physical and mental health of people with eating disorders (EDs). Since this is a new and developing field, this study aimed to investigate the experience, practices and knowledge of International physical therapy experts to inform clinical practice, education and research.</p> <p>Methods An International cross-sectional survey design was undertaken with experienced physical therapists within the field of EDs. Physical therapist responses were analysed with descriptive statistics and thematic analysis as appropriate.</p> <p>Results Twenty-eight International physical therapists participated. On average participants had 6.9 years (95% CI: 3.1-10.7, n=27) of clinical experience working in eating disorder settings and devoted approximately 39.3% (95%CI: 23.8-54.8, n=27) of their time to treating individuals with EDs. Participants reported that physical therapy interventions have a diverse range of benefits on the physical, mental and disease specific factors (e.g. binges) in people with EDs. The key role of physical therapists includes improving body awareness, especially during physical activity combined with psycho-education about healthy doses of physical activity. Physical therapists were able to identify a range of barriers and facilitators to physical activity in people with EDs.</p> <p>Discussion</p> <p>This article provides a first step towards understanding the role and value of physical therapists working with individuals with EDs.</p>

**Title**

Considering the role of physical therapists within the treatment and rehabilitation of individuals with eating disorders: [an International](#) survey of expert clinicians

**Abstract**

**Purpose** Recent research has demonstrated that physical therapy may benefit the physical and mental health of people with eating disorders (EDs). Since this is a new and developing field, this study aimed to investigate the experience, practices and knowledge of International physical therapy experts to inform clinical practice, education and research.

**Methods** An International cross-sectional survey design was undertaken with experienced physical therapists within the field of EDs. Physical therapist responses were analysed with descriptive statistics and thematic analysis as appropriate.

**Results** Twenty-eight International physical therapists participated. On average participants had 6.9 years (95% CI: 3.1-10.7, n=27) of clinical experience working in eating disorder settings and devoted approximately 39.3% (95%CI: 23.8-54.8, n=27) of their time to treating individuals with EDs.

[Participants reported that](#) physical therapy interventions have a diverse range of benefits on the physical, mental and disease specific factors (e.g. binges) in people with EDs. The key role of physical therapists includes improving body awareness, especially during physical activity combined with psycho-education about healthy doses of physical activity. Physical therapists were able to identify a range of barriers and facilitators to physical activity in people with EDs.

**Discussion**

This article provides a first step towards understanding the role and value of physical therapists working with individuals [with EDs](#).

## Introduction

Eating disorders (EDs), such as anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN), binge eating disorder (BED), constitute a group of disorders involving disturbed body image coupled with eating and/or weight loss behaviours (American Psychiatric Association; APA, 2013) that cause severe distress and impairment to quality of life (Winkler, Christiansen et al., 2014). In the general population, eating disorders have a lifetime prevalence of roughly 0.6% for [AN](#), 1% for [BN](#), and 3% for [BED](#) (Jacobi, Wittchen et al., 2004; Hudson, Hiripi et al., 2007).

While [AN](#) is characterised by excessive dieting and hyperactivity that leads to severe weight loss with a pathological fear of [excessive weight gain](#), the core feature of [BN](#) and [BED](#) is loss of control over the eating behaviour resulting in binge eating (APA, 2013). Binge eating involves taking in an abnormally large quantity of food in a discrete time period and feeling a lack of control during the episode (APA, 2013). [BN differs from BED by](#) compensatory behaviors [that](#) occur after a binge and might include vomiting, laxative or other diet medication use, fasting, or excessive exercise (APA, 2013).

All EDs are associated with significant impairment of physical health and psychosocial functioning and carry increased risk of death (Treasure, Claudino et al., 2010). Physical abnormalities seen in AN seem to be largely secondary to the disturbed eating habits and their compromised nutritional state and include decreased bone integrity (osteopenia leading to osteoporosis), weak proximal muscles, bradycardia, gastrointestinal symptoms, dizziness and syncope and amenorrhea (Treasure, Claudino et al., 2010). The physical abnormalities seen in BN are usually minor unless vomiting, or laxative or diuretic misuse are frequent, in which case there is risk of electrolyte disturbance. The physical consequences of BED are largely, however not solely (Hudson, Lalonde et al., 2010), due to a co-morbid obesity and a sedentary lifestyle (Vancampfort, Vanderlinden et al., 2014). All EDs also present with psychiatric co-morbidity in a number of important areas, including depression, bipolar

disorder, anxiety disorders (obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, other phobias, and post-traumatic stress disorder) and substance abuse (Fairburn, 2003; O'Brien and Vincent, 2003; Javaras, Pope et al., 2008).

Because of co-morbid physical and psychiatric conditions, ED have been characterised as one of the most difficult psychiatric conditions to treat (Crow and Peterson, 2009). A small body of evidence currently exists for the efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy as an effective form of psychotherapy (Hay, Bacaltchuk et al., 2009; Vocks, Tuschien-Caffier et al., 2010; Hartmann, Weber et al., 2011). Evidence from pharmacological trials are identified as being in early stages of development (Reas and Grilo, 2014) and remains limited (Mitchell, Roerig et al., 2013). However some preliminary evidence supports the use of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors in adults with [BN](#) (Greetfeld, Cuntz et al., 2012). In general, it might be stated that current treatments are only moderately successful, indicating that an advancement of psychological and physical treatments are urgently needed.

Since a distorted body image (identified as negative perceptions of one's weight, size or shape and the inability to integrate and perceive realistic bodily sensations (Catala'n-Matamoros, Helvik-Skjaerven et al., 2011)) and unregulated or unhealthy physical activity (identified as any bodily movement generated by the skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure (Caspersen, Powell et al. 1985)) behavior are central in the course of all EDs, and patients perceive improving self-esteem and body experience as core constructs which influence their treatment (Vanderlinden, Buis et al., 2007), physical therapy (focusing on physical activity behavior and body experience and insight) might be a treatment modality that has great potential. A recent systematic review including 8 randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and involving 213 patients (age-range: 16-36 years) (Vancampfort, Vanderlinden et al., 2013) concluded that aerobic and resistance training result in significantly increased muscle strength, body mass index (BMI) and body fat percentage in patients with AN. In addition, aerobic exercise, yoga, massage and Basic Body Awareness Therapy (BBAT), the

latter focusing on movement experiences and insight (Hedlund and Gyllensten, 2010; Thörnborg and Mattsson, 2010), significantly lowered scores of eating pathology and depressive symptoms in [patients with AN and BN](#). To date, the evidence on physical therapy in persons with BED is limited to 3 RCTs involving 211 female community patients (age-range: 25-63years) (Vancampfort, Vanderlinden et al., 2014). The limited literature on physical therapy in persons with BED however clearly demonstrates that aerobic, [or](#) yoga exercises reduce the number of binges and body mass index (BMI) of BED patients. [Aerobic exercise, combined with CBT appears to be more effective in reducing BMI and depressive symptoms, than CBT alone](#). A pilot RCT also found that BBAT may improve eating attitude and consequently help reduce the severity level of the EDs (Catalã-Matamoros, Helvik-Skjaerven et al., 2011).

The current body of evidence indicates that physical therapy interventions in [EDs](#) demonstrate great promise as a strategy to [reduce depressive symptoms](#) and [improve the](#) physical health of those affected. However, the implementation of physical therapy interventions in the multidisciplinary treatment of EDs is still in its infancy as demonstrated by the recent review papers (Probst, Majeweski et al., 2013; Vancampfort, Vanderlinden et al., 2013; Vancampfort, Vanderlinden et al., 2014). Given the need for the development of non-pharmacological interventions and the promising nature of physical therapy in [EDs](#), an investigation of the practice of International experts is required to inform clinical practice for the care of those with EDs. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the current practices and perceived benefits of physical therapy among International experts in the field of EDs.

**Methods**

**Design**

We employed a cross-sectional online [pilot](#) survey to ascertain the clinical experiences of physical therapy experts in the treatment of people with EDs.

**Participants**

In order to locate physical therapists working with individuals with mental illness we contacted all members of the International Organization of Physical Therapists in Mental Health (IOPTMH) a subgroup of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy (approximately n=480). This included a range of countries (39 countries across 6 continents) and include practitioners, educators and researchers in the field of mental health (Probst, 2012). We specifically sought the experiences of mental health physical therapists working with EDs patients (exact eligible n=unknown). Ethical approval was gained from the primary author’s institution (REF: RG\_14-012).

**The questionnaire**

The questions for the cross-sectional survey were developed by experts (all authors) in physical activity prescription in EDs and with reference to the literature (Vanderlinden, Adriaensen et al., 2012; Probst, Majeweskib et al., 2013; Vancampfort, Vanderlinden et al., 2013; Vancampfort and Probst, 2014; Vancampfort, Vanderlinden et al., 2014). The survey considered demographic information (nationality, age, experience, training and number of patients seen each month) along with 4 questions (4 open ended, 1 with an added Likert scale response) which included: (1) what interventions the physical therapists currently used, (2) what outcome measures were used for assessment (3) should physical activity have a role in treatment, considered as a Likert scale response and open ended response, and (4) what the barriers or facilitators to physical activity and exercise were for each condition.

A small pilot study with a number (n=3) of physical therapists to assess face validity and ease of use was performed. No changes in the questionnaire were needed.

## Protocol

The survey was sent out in English, as this is the official language of the WCPT. Three emails (initial invitation and reminder emails) were sent to all members of the IOPTMH between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of April 2013. The emails contained a link to a secure online survey tool (Qualtrics available at <http://www.qualtrics.com/>). Participants were informed about the purposes of the study and were told that filling in a questionnaire represented informed consent.

## Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies were used. Verbatim quotes from participants were entered into excel and thematically analysed (Soundy, Stubbs et al., 2014). Questions 1, ~~and 2~~ and 3 ([open ended question](#)) were undertaken using a quantitative content analysis (numbers used to qualify the interventions or outcome measures used), whilst questions 3 ([closed ended question](#)), 4 and 5 were undertaken using a traditional qualitative analysis. An audit trail is available from the corresponding author upon request. Indicative verbatim quotations were used to illustrate the themes and subsequent categories, and on each occasion, the physical therapists study number (P), age, gender and country are also reported.



Results

Respondent’s demographics

Twenty eight physical therapists (42.0±12.6 years, 19 male) from 3 continents (Europe n=23, Africa n = 4, North America n = 1) completed the survey. The educational status of individuals included 16 with BSc level qualifications, 6 with Masters level qualifications and 6 with PhD level qualifications. Sixteen participants primarily described their role as clinicians, 4 were researchers (all researchers had previous clinical experience in ED or were currently engaged in clinical practice), 2 were clinical educators, and 6 had a combination of these roles.

Clinical experience of respondents

Overall, the physical therapists had over 10 years on average experience in mental health settings (11.4±8.4 years, 95% CI: 8.3-14.6, n=27) and 6.9 years (95% CI: 3.1-10.7, n=27) experience working in ED settings. The mean percentage of time estimated working in different settings was as follows: inpatients (46.3%, 95% CI: 30.8-61.8, n=23), outpatients (37.8%, 95% CI:23.1-52.6, n=27) and community (4.1%, 95%CI:-0.1-8.3, n=22). Within their job role, the mean percentage of time working with patients who have an ED was 39.3% (95% CI: 23.8-54.8, n=27). Physical therapists most often worked with individuals with AN identified by (73.9% n=17 out of n=23), followed by BED (26.0% n=6 out of 23). On average the therapist treated 5.6 (n=17, 95% CI:3.2-8.1) patients per month with AN, 3.2 (n=14, 95% CI: 1.5-5.0) patients per month with BN and 2.9 (n=12, 95% CI: 1.0-4.8) patients per month with BED.

What interventions do mental health physical therapists use with people with suffering from eating disorders?

Eight physical therapists provided details regarding the interventions that they use when working with peopled with EDs. Broadly, the interventions were split into four types of intervention:

(1) Physical, functional and manual interventions and the use of movement or exercise (exercise differs from movement in being a more planned and structured form of physical activity (Caspersen, Powell et al. 1985)) therapy. Physical therapists also identified the need for other interventions which could assist in pain management (n=2) or exercises to support or aid breathing more freely (n=1). Finally, traditional manual techniques ([e.g., massage, mobilisations or manipulations](#)) were identified when BMI was very low included working with joints, heart and breathing.

(2) Psychotherapeutic-related interventions including relaxation techniques (n=3) as well as mindfulness (bringing an individual's attention into the present moment in a non-judgemental way) (n=1) and rational-emotive therapy (an action orientated approach based on CBT which considers events which lead to behaviour or emotional disturbance or upset) (n=1).

(3) Education provided included information about how physical activity should be adjusted (n=2) (4) Supporting the person to become more aware of and re-interpreting body awareness (greater insight and/or becoming more aware of bodily signals), exercise and movement experience.

(4) Seven physical therapists specifically identified the use of BBAT as a specific physical therapy intervention. Other informants provided explanations of why this orientation was important which included *changing the experience of exercise and movement*. For instance, one physical therapist stated:

*"To start a contact that for some people can continue also in day care and more of body awareness to find new ways of respecting oneself and to find ways of finding joy in moving and exercising and not as a way of keeping bodyweight down or reducing anxiety level."* (P3 F 53 EU).

*What outcome measures are used by mental health physical therapists with people with eating disorders?*

A total of 8 physical therapists provided details of the outcome measures they used and only two outcome measures specifically related to [EDs](#) were identified by more than one physical therapist.

Overall, 5 physical therapists utilised the Body Awareness Rating Scale (Friis, Skatteboe et al., 1989) and two physical therapists identified the Body Attitude Test (Probst, Vandereycken et al., 1995). Finally, three further scales were identified by one physical therapist. These included; the Eating Disorders Inventory (Garner, Olmstead et al., 2006), the Eating Attitudes Test (Pelaez-Fernandez, Ruiz-Lazaro et al., 2014), and the Binge Eating Scale (Gormally, Black et al., 1982).

*Is it important that physical therapists are involved in delivering physical activity?*

Twenty three physical therapists responded to question that asked if physical therapists have a role in promoting physical activity. Of these responses most (73.3%, 17 out of 23) strongly agreed physical therapists should have a central role in delivering physical activity in persons suffering from EDs whilst the remainder agreed (21.7%, 5 out of 23).

*What is the role and value of physical activity in for persons suffering from eating disorders?*

Eight physical therapists provided information on the role and value of physical activity in EDs and multiple benefits across a broad range of domains of health were identified. This is exemplified by one physical therapist who stated physical therapy has a role in:

*“improving quality of life, reducing risk for physical co-morbidities, coping with binges, working around body experiences and self-esteem, increasing physical activity in daily life.”*  
(P2 M 35 EU).

Overall, the benefits reported were developed in 2 major themes. The first was the psychological and behavioural benefits of engaging in physical activity within physical therapy. Within this theme, 5 sub-themes became apparent including: (1) increased quality of life and a decreased psychological morbidity. Specifically, participants stated that an increased quality of life, with improved mental health (e.g., greater body image, less body dissatisfaction and improved self-esteem) was an essential benefit. For example one physical therapist stated that physical activity had a role in: *“Strengthening the self-esteem through a bodily approach”* (P4 F 41 EU) and another stated that

physical activity *“improves body image and body dissatisfaction.”* (P7 M 34 EU). Within the second subtheme (2) participants stated the importance of valuing movement, in that individuals were able to develop enjoyment from engaging/involving in the movement experiences . For instance one physical therapist stated patients with EDs often *“find joy and pleasure in moving”* (meaning, by being in it, exploring and experiencing the movement) (P3 F 53 EU). Across the third subtheme (3) participants identified a decrease in illness symptoms and normalising eating behaviour and hunger as a result of engaging in physical activity. For instance one physical therapist stated that health physical activity or exercise engagement can actually result in *“decreasing binge behaviour”* (P7 M 34 EU). (4) The fourth subtheme identified an improved sense of body awareness and greater control and understanding of healthy exercise behaviour. One physical therapist summarised that physical therapy can help:

*“To find a balanced way to be in physical activity, rather than letting the activity be driven by the eating disorder.”* (P4 F 41 EU).

Thus, two key aspects to this sub-theme existed: first, individuals with [EDs](#) require a degree of re-education about healthy engagement in physical activity and exercise. This point is exemplified by one physical therapist who stated that:

*“We guide the patients in monitoring their exercise, guide, / and /or join them when trying out healthy exercise, evaluate the experiences, and learn whether the exercise has an impact on the eating disorder”* (P5 F 36 EU).

The second key aspect was that participants stated individuals with [EDs](#) were required to change the view they had of their body or have an increased body awareness, which in turn meant understanding who they were (re-establishing a positive identity) and how they should feel when exercising/ moving in a more healthy way. For instance one physical therapist stated that through a physical therapy based interventions:

*“We help the patients get a sense of who they are, what they need and what they feel”* (P1 F 63 EU).

Within the final subtheme (5) therapists identified specific improvement in an individual's physiological condition and markers as a benefit from engaging in physical activity. For instance one physical therapist stated physical activity results in:

*"Increased muscle mass, increased BDNF, increased serotonin, increased endorphins, less hyperactivity"* (P9 F 26 A).

In summary, [it is clear that participants view physical therapy and physical activity as valuable in improving body awareness and psychological well-being in individuals with EDs.](#)

*What are the barriers and facilitators to physical activity in people with eating disorders?*

Again eight physical therapists ([same individuals as above](#)) identified a range barriers and facilitators to physical activity. A full table of barriers and facilitators within each ED is provided in Table 1. The general facilitators included: (1) the experience of physical activity enabling a sense of control for the individual and their eating and exercise behaviour, (2) improving cognitions and thoughts concerning the body, and improving education of the individual. The general barriers included: (1) disease symptoms like compulsivity to exercise and the disease controlling behaviour, (2) a negative body attitude or feelings and emotions related to this, (3) a low self-esteem, (4) feelings of shame, as well as (5) a lack of self-acceptance.

## Discussion

This [research represents](#) ~~is~~ the first international survey of its kind, capturing the views and experiences of expert [clinicians](#) within the field of physical therapy in EDs. Physical therapists were able to identify multiple benefits of engaging in physical therapy for individuals with EDs across biopsychosocial domains. The current results have identified that currently few specialist mental health physical therapists are working with patients who have EDs. Thus, it is essential that a better understanding of the role of physical therapists within the multidisciplinary treatment is developed before it can be further promoted to the wider community. International guidelines (National Institute for Clinical and Healthcare Excellence, 2004) recommend that people with [EDs](#) should first be offered community and outpatient-treatment and that inpatient care be used for those who do not respond or who present with high risk. [In line with NICE guidelines, our current results demonstrate that there is a need to promote physical therapy as part of an early intervention and to shift the role of physical therapists to community settings rather than inpatient settings.](#) Moreover, our participants identified that physical therapy can have a range of beneficial effects on the mental and physical health of people with EDs and identified two key objectives for physical therapy. Firstly, physical therapists should consider and work with bodily experiences on different levels including behaviour, perception, awareness and attitudes. For instance, awareness raising of the current physical condition of the patient's body, acknowledgement and acceptance of changes in body weight and the associated feelings and needs of patients should all be considered. Further, increases in coping with daily demands, greater contact with the body, daily movement and functions, and related feelings and an ability to gain confidence in relationships were pointed out. Physical therapists also identified associated outcome measures, in particular the Body Awareness Rating Scale and the Body Attitude Test. Second, the participating physical therapists reported that it is essential that they assist patients with EDs in changing unhealthy physical activity behaviours. Participants identified the importance of empowering individuals to regulate a healthier lifestyle and also recognise the potential of physical activity to provide broader benefits such as improved social

identities, belonging and connectedness, as well as increase social confidence (Soundy, Freeman et al., 2014).

Clear guidance regarding the type of physical therapy intervention (aerobic exercise, resistance training, breathing exercises or body-related interventions) and the optimal dose was however not provided by any of the included participants. This is not surprising since only a limited number of rigorous studies on physical therapy in [EDs](#) are available. Further currently recommendations from the American College of Sport Medicine (Skrinar and Hutchinson, 2009) focus on severe mental illness in general, rather than defined categories like [AN](#). Until more evidence is available physical therapists should preferably assess the types of exercises or techniques that would best fit a person's preferences. Further to this, the use of objective measurements to assess and document physical activity (e.g., pedometers, accelerometers) may help clinicians in guiding patients to engaging in healthy levels of behaviour. Probably more important for the daily clinical practice is the awareness of facilitators and barriers for physical therapy. Our survey identified that disease symptoms like compulsivity to exercise, a negative body attitude or feelings and emotions related to this, a low self-esteem, feelings of shame, as well as a lack of self-acceptance are considered as important barriers. Future research is needed to guide physical therapists in how to assist patients in coping with these barriers. A very recent study in individuals with [BED](#) (Vancampfort, Probst et al., 2014) showed that the principles of the self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) might facilitate adherence towards physical therapy. It might be hypothesized that supporting and stimulating feelings of competence (i.e., feeling effective to attain desired outcomes) will be facilitated by the nature of the physical therapy program. Feelings of competence may be facilitated through the promotion of environments in which self-referenced standards and indicators of improvement are adopted as opposed to competitive situations in which evaluated outcomes are dependent upon the performance or bodily appearance of others (Springer, Lamborn et al., 2013). By providing individual, concrete and realistic weekly schemes, patients with [EDs](#) will likely experience individual successes. Feelings of control might be facilitated as well by providing

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2  
3 autonomy (i.e., experiencing a sense of psychological freedom when engaging in physical therapy).  
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5 In practice, autonomy might be achieved by providing choices to patients, supporting their  
6  
7 initiatives, offering relevant personal information for changing behavior and using autonomy  
8  
9 supportive language (e.g. “may” and “could” rather than “should” and “must”) which might be  
10  
11 facilitated by using the motivational interviewing techniques (Miller and Rollnick, 2002). In  
12  
13 agreement with reports from the participating physical therapists in the current study, also Probst  
14  
15 Majeweskib et al. (2013) very recently stated that psycho-education regarding bodily functions  
16  
17 might be an important issue. For example, it is important to explain the functions of the respiratory  
18  
19 system during breathing exercises. The therapist’s role should consist of thoroughly explaining that  
20  
21 weight gain is not synonymous with feeling fat, but with health, attractiveness, and expressiveness.  
22  
23 Other topics for psycho-education are basic anatomy/physiology, the risk of osteoporosis, the  
24  
25 negative impact of stress and anxiety on the body, stress and anxiety coping strategies, and the  
26  
27 influences of the media on socio-cultural ideals. In addition, education could include more  
28  
29 traditional self management techniques and exercises. Whenever possible, physical therapists should  
30  
31 design their exercises in such a way that patients can also try these exercises outside the therapy-  
32  
33 sessions in daily life situations, on their own, or with a partner. This can be successfully done with  
34  
35 breathing exercises, relaxation training, body awareness exercises and stress coping strategies. It is  
36  
37 important that patients assume responsibility for their therapy. Finally, future research should  
38  
39 explore the role of interpersonal relatedness (e.g., being socially connected and feeling a sense of  
40  
41 belonging with others) in facilitating physical therapy interventions (Soundy, et al., 2014). This can  
42  
43 be achieved by stimulating the participants to involve meaningful others in the therapy. It may also  
44  
45 be suggested that physical therapy sessions in a group setting provide a venue for social support  
46  
47 from other patients, thereby increasing participation. Being able to test out new skills with trusted  
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49 others is also an important part of building competence (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Deci and Ryan, 2002).  
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54 The current findings should be considered in the light of some methodological limitations.  
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56 For example, there was a small response rate (in the open ended questions partly due to not giving a  
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written response) and the physical therapists that answered the open ended questions may have had greater training than most physical therapists working in mental health setting. Moreover, only members of the IOPTMH were invited to take part (who are more likely to be experts) but some physical therapists may have expertise in ED but may not be part of the IOPTMH. For these reasons and the relatively small numbers of respondents, the current results should be considered as a preliminary. In addition, the results may be biased because physical therapists within particular countries, which advocate particular approaches (e.g., body awareness therapy) or outcome measures may have been over represented. Because data from particular clinics or countries are not available it is hard to identify to what extent this occurred. The results also may be biased by participant demographics (e.g., greater males in the sample) or by the structure of the survey.

However, as mentioned, this might be representative for the limited number of physical therapists currently involved in this field. A higher response rate would require a funded study that can access mental health departments directly, identify all related professional groups (physiologist, nurses exercise specialists or physiotherapists) within individual countries. Secondly, the thematic analysis may have been influenced by the primary author previous experience of coding specialist mental health physical therapists responses (e.g., Soundy et al., 2014) or affected by the open coding strategy used (as opposed to using a framework or a-priori approach).

Although with limitations, the current study clearly demonstrates that physical therapy can have a wide and diverse range of benefits on the health of people with EDs. In addition, physical therapists are well placed to deliver and facilitate a diverse range of physical therapy interventions in EDs given the projected role and insight into the barriers and facilitators. Finally, this study does also illustrate that few physical therapists are currently working in this relatively new area therefore rehabilitation clinicians will benefit from the findings of this research.

Summary

Physical therapists in the current study identified three main functions of physiotherapeutic treatment: (1) to provide movement or physical activity, which they considered a primary role, (2) to provide psychotherapeutic intervention, and (3) to provide educational advice to help promote healthy behaviours. The most common outcome measures included the body awareness rating scale and the Body Attitude Test but we suspect this may be because of a particularly strong response rate from Scandinavia where the BBAT approach is particularly prominent. Physical therapists identified psychological benefits from therapy, the main benefits included an increase in self-esteem and body image. They also identified the importance of helping patients change the view they had about physical activity and their body image.

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Table 1 The barriers and facilitators to physical activity across eating disorders identified by physical therapists

Disorder	Facilitators	Barriers
<b>Anorexia Nervosa</b>	Psychosocial: Change cognitions demonstrating greater or improved awareness of the body. Autonomy, competence or self-efficacy and connectedness with others.  Behavioural and environmental: Participation in guided activity from professionals. Facilitated by psycho-education, improved bodily experiences, exploration and reflection on experiences.	Psychosocial: Compulsiveness of behaviours, poorly developed functional affect regulating strategies, a negative body attitude, low self-acceptance and need for perfectionism.  Behavioural and environmental: Activities that are undertaken with no contact to emotions or association with the will to get better.
<b>Bulimia</b>	Psychosocial: Autonomy, competence or self-efficacy and connectedness with others. Awareness concerning body, emotions and thoughts.  Behavioural and environmental: Psycho-education and positive experiences. Participation in guided/graded physical activity from professionals.	Physical: Co-morbidities and poor physical condition.  Psychosocial: Low self-acceptance and compulsivity. Not being able to regulate behaviour internally.  Behavioural and environmental: not identified.
<b>Binge Eating Disorder</b>	Psychosocial: being able to control drives and binges. Awareness of the body, thoughts and emotions. Competence or self-efficacy, connectedness and autonomy.	Physical: Co-morbidities  Psychosocial: Shame, low self-esteem, low self-acceptance and low levels of social support.

	Behavioural and environmental: graded activity from professionals.	Behavioural and environmental: No experience of positive behaviour.
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