

Relationship, preserving agency, and integration of biological/nutrition + emotional elements were identified as key components of RDNs’ facilitation of nutrition counseling.

Key Components of Effective Nutrition Counseling in Eating Disorder Treatment: A Qualitative Study

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Background

Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) are consistently recognized as key members of multidisciplinary eating disorder (ED) treatment teams, but research on the impact of nutrition counseling as a component of nutrition rehabilitation and longer-term recovery is sparse.

Objective

The objective of this study was to understand the experiences of engaging in nutrition counseling as a component of eating disorder (ED) treatment and identify and articulate impactful aspects of the patient-provider relationship.

Methods: A Qualitative Study

This qualitative study recruited 21 U.S.-based adults with a current or past eating disorder diagnosis who were (1) stable in recovery or considered themselves as recovered and (2) had worked with a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN) as a component of their ED treatment. Consenting individuals participated in semi-structured interviews, and data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Participant Characteristics	n
Age	
<35 years	8
35–50 years	9
60+ years	4
Gender	
Woman	17
Nonbinary	3
Prefer to self-describe	1
Transgender	2
ED Diagnosis*	
Anorexia nervosa (AN)	14
Atypical AN (AAN)	3
Bulimia nervosa (BN)	2
Binge-eating disorder (BED)	4
Un- or Otherwise Specified ED	1

* more than one response allowed

Conclusions

Therapeutic alliance supported difficult and deeper conversations in nutrition counseling settings. Participants felt being in relationship and talking about “more than just food” facilitated recovery.



1. Therapeutic Alliance as a Key Element

All three aspects of Therapeutic Alliance were consistently mentioned in participant interviews as necessary for effective nutrition counseling.

BOND

“Trust was built, and you know, I love that we were on this journey together.”
— Participant 11, 45 YO woman, AAN

“I think having a relationship where I feel very comfortable, really, bringing anything to the session. And she does a great job of holding space even if it’s not like applicable. So, I feel really heard after my sessions.”
— Participant 10, 24 YO woman, BED

SHARED GOALS

She’s someone that has pushed me to think about things differently and try different things, but respecting where I’m at and what I’m ready for...I can tell her what I’m actually struggling with. I don’t have to hide anything because I know that she will respect me, regardless of what I’m going through. It’s a good working relationship.”
– Participant 14, 26 YO woman, AN

COLLABORATIVE TASKS

“The body image discussions we had felt instrumental to enable me to have a greater potential of meeting her recommendations for food intake... She was able to work with me to plan foods that felt within my realm of capability and my lifestyle.”
— Participant 13, 36 YO, non-binary, AN-R

3. Value of Expertise and Holistic Approach

Participants described leaning on dietitians’ expertise to counter the ED. RDNs integrated medical and emotional components into sessions, which helped participants achieve goals before fully trusting the recovery process.

TRUST IN DIETITIAN’S EXPERTISE

“I think I felt really seen, and I felt safe ...I felt very safe because I really felt like she knew what she was doing like she really was in tune... So like you know, I would sit there and be like, I don’t really believe this, but I’m doing it.”
— Participant 19, 58 YO woman, AN

SYNTHESIS OF BIOLOGICAL & EMOTIONAL THREADS

“Connecting food to other areas of my life I think that has been really helpful ... I think for me her approach has seemed very integrated.”
– Participant 7, 33 YO non-binary, AN, BN

I was just kind of trepidatious about like how much of this is going to be just talking about food which just makes me anxious and or bored and disinterested versus like how much is it actually talking about the emotional nuances behind eating disorders? ... So once I realized that we could go back and forth ...I think, just seeing how well rounded it was, made me look forward to going versus just being like, you know, an obligation I had to meet.”
— Participant 21, 38 YO woman, BED

2. Growth Through Difficult Conversations

Nutrition counseling involved difficult conversations. Participants described valuing work with RDNs who recognized their humanity and worked with them, rather than being authoritarian. Relational aspects mitigated challenging patterns like secrecy.

PRESERVING AUTONOMY & AGENCY

“Her ability to listen, and be present, and be very authentic, and meet me like where I was at, so it didn’t scare me, you know? I could get easily spooked by like a dietitian trying to control me. It felt very like ‘I’m gonna work with you where you’re at, like, we’re gonna help you.”
— Participant 15, 31 YO woman, AN

FEELING SEEN & HEARD HELPED IN CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

“I remember that as being like, it wasn’t like I’m getting one over on them. It’s like they’re seeing me as a person.”
— Participant 18, 36 YO woman, AN

“I think having that safe space around food and behaviors and knowing that I’m not gonna get in trouble, or she’s gonna, like, stop working with me or be mad at me.”
— Participant 17, 30 YO, AN

NOT JUST A MEAL PLAN
Relational attunement was identified by participants as a key to effective nutrition counseling

4. Relationships Facilitated Deeper Work

Therapeutic relationship with their dietitian was instrumental in supporting the movement into the deeper work en route to recovery.

PROGRESS WITH A FOUNDATION BUILT ON RAPPORT

“Sometimes my eating disorder definitely can be sneaky and I go through, like, lies of omission where it’s like I started exercising and I didn’t tell you or I changed this [and] didn’t tell you. So that I go through periods of that and I think because I have like rapport with her and like really value our relationship, I do end up telling you the truth, whereas in the past I did not care.”
— Participant 4, 29 YOxv woman, AN

“I would say that more than anything, the longer we work together the more I realize that food and body and the work that we do isn’t just limited to food and body. It’s body and other things. And that’s been really wonderful.”
—Participant 9, 27 YO woman, BED

I think it was more just counseling... I needed to get the numbers out of my head. Oh, so number focused. I needed not the math, not the science. I just needed the relationship.”
— Participant 3, 46 YO woman, AN, BN

“I feel like I’ve found my match in that sense that, like she knows when to push me, but also when to like not necessarily coddle me, but like no, when to like, pull back ... she’s super helpful in the sense that she reminds me of how far I’ve come on days when I’m having a really hard day”
— Participant 8, 29 YO woman, AN-R