



More than a number

Summary of weight management for people with lived experience of severe mental illness

Introduction

The report, *More than a number*, by the VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance, explores key themes around weight management for people with severe mental illness based on experiences of service users and professionals, as well as other research. It aims to help people to understand what is important to people with severe mental illness in terms of weight management support.

People with severe mental illness are more likely to be overweight than the general population, as the issues that people with experience around weight management face can often be made worse by mental illness.

This report summary will go through the difficulties people with severe mental illness face around weight management, and how weight management support can be improved.

Difficulties people with severe mental illness face with weight management:

- ▷ **Motivation**- As people's mental health goes up and down, so can their motivation to eat healthily and exercise. People reported that it was hard to take the first step towards losing weight and 'get going'
- ▷ **Education**- People can struggle to understand what the 'right' and 'healthy' things to eat are, and how much exercise they should be doing, due to conflicting information
- ▷ **Emotional eating**- People have complex, emotional relationships to eating. People often use food to manage their feelings, comfort themselves or relieve boredom or loneliness
- ▷ **Medication**- Many antipsychotics, antidepressants and mood stabilisers are associated with weight gain
- ▷ **Tiredness**- People can often feel tired due to their mental illness or medication, with little energy to cook healthily or exercise
- ▷ **Financial and environmental factors**- Some healthy foods and activities can be expensive or inaccessible depending on people's income and where they live
- ▷ **Blame and shame**- People who are overweight often feel judged by services and society in general. People who are overweight and have severe mental illness face double stigma. They may feel that if they access weight loss services, they will encounter prejudices about mental illness
- ▷ **Time spent on inpatient wards**



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Improving support for people with severe mental illness to manage their weight:

- ▷ **Take the emphasis off numbers** (e.g. kilograms lost or reductions in BMI)- If people do not lose enough, they can feel disheartened or lose hope. Goals should be based on things that are within a person's control. For example attending an exercise class or managing to maintain weight (no weight gained) can be celebrated as achievements
- ▷ **Focus on enjoyment and long-term lifestyle changes**- People can see diets and gyms as restrictive and things which make them unhappy. Positive and social activities such as dance classes or walking groups will improve physical and mental health and reduce the chances of people quitting
- ▷ **Proactive support to take the first step**- Although many people are motivated to lose weight, they find it difficult to start, so professionals should provide support with first steps including leaving the house or attending an activity for the first time
- ▷ **Building a relationship**- A trusting, supportive relationship with a professional is important to help people with severe mental illness to engage with weight management services
- ▷ **Psychological interventions**- One to one therapies or support to discuss the reasons behind emotional eating and strategies for change personalised weight loss services for people with severe mental illness

Key findings from the report:

- People with severe mental illness need personalised support with weight management
- Weight management is complex, and no one size of support fits all
- People need long-term support that helps them to maintain a healthy lifestyle and adapts to their changing needs and situation. Weight management is a lifelong process
- People want more holistic services that look beyond the numbers (weight, BMI etc)
- More focus is needed on how mental illness and emotions effect eating
- More focus is needed on the mind-body connection and impact of physical health on mental health and vice versa
- Interventions need to be delivered by staff who have been trained in helping people with severe mental illness to manage their weight