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**The lived experience of working with people with eating disorders:**

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**A meta-ethnography**

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**Abstract**

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3 Objective: Working with people with eating disorders (EDs) is known to elicit strong  
4 emotional reactions, and the therapeutic alliance has been shown to affect outcomes with this  
5 clinical population. As a consequence, it is important to understand healthcare professionals’  
6 (HCPs’) experiences of working with this client group.

7 Method: A meta-synthesis was conducted of qualitative research on HCPs’ lived experiences  
8 of working with people with EDs. The results from the identified studies were analyzed using  
9 Noblit and Hare’s meta-ethnographic method. Data were synthesized using reciprocal  
10 translation, and a line of argument was developed.

11 Results: Thirty-seven studies met the inclusion criteria. Reciprocal translation resulted in a  
12 key concept: “Coping with caring without curing.” This was underpinned by the following  
13 third-order concepts: (a) “The dissonance and discomfort of being a helper struggling to  
14 help,” (b) “Defending against the dissonance,” and (c) “Accepting the dissonance to provide  
15 safe and compassionate care.” These concepts were used to develop a line-of-argument  
16 synthesis, which was expressed as a new model for understanding HCPs’ experiences of  
17 working with people who have an ED.

18 Discussion: While the conflict associated with being a helper struggling to help led some  
19 HCPs to avoid and blame people with EDs, others adopted a compassionate stance  
20 characterized by humanity, humility, balance, and awareness.

21

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23 Key words:

24 Systematic review

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1 Meta-ethnography

2 Eating disorders

3 Healthcare professionals

4 Qualitative research

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### **Introduction**

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Eating disorders (EDs) have a reputation for being challenging to treat (Startup, Mountford,

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Lavender, & Schmidt, 2015) in the context of high levels of risk, relapse and resistance

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(Jansen, 2016; Reilly, Anderson, Gorrell, Schaumberg, & Anderson, 2017; Zaitsoff, Pullmer,

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Cyr, & Aime, 2015). Anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN) are associated with

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many medical complications, some of which can be fatal (Westmoreland, Krantz, & Mehler,

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2016), which means that healthcare professionals (HCPs) working with this client group are

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required to manage high levels of physical and psychiatric risk concurrently (Le, Barendregt,

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Hay, & Mihalopoulos, 2017). Managing significant risk is linked to emotional exhaustion,

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particularly where HCPs have unrealistic self-expectations (Kleespies & Dettmer, 2000).

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Recovery is often elusive, with only 31% of people with AN and 68% of those with BN

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recovering within nine years (Eddy et al., 2017). A further challenge of the work is many

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clients value aspects of their ED (Fassino & Abbate-Dage, 2013) and therefore regard HCPs

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as a threat, which fosters inaccurate self-report and disengagement (Gregertsen, Mandy, &

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Serpell, 2017). Moreover, there are few evidence-based treatments for EDs, particularly AN

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(Lock, 2015). Given that thinness can elicit envy in societies in which it is culturally

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endorsed (Beggan, & DeAngelis, 2015), HCPs may have mixed feelings towards

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underweight clients, which can further complicate the work. Concerns have been raised that

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the training of HCPs working with ED clients is inadequate (e.g., Hay, Darby, & Mond,

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2007; Jones, Saeidi, & Morgan, 2013).

22

HCPs caring for people with EDs frequently report feelings of anxiety, distress, anger,

23

and exasperation (Golan, Yaroslavski, & Stein, 2009; Land, 2004), and often have

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stigmatizing views of these clients (Raveneau, Feinstein, Rosen, & Fisher, 2014). Lower

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functioning and higher levels of dysregulation among service users (Satir et al., 2009),

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1 clinician inexperience, larger caseloads and a diagnosis of AN are independently associated  
2 with more negative reactions among HCPs (Franko & Rolfe, 1996). Managing negative  
3 reactions via externalization of EDs, self-monitoring and discussion in supervision can reduce  
4 staff burnout (Golan et al., 2009). There is evidence that acceptance-based interventions are  
5 helpful for staff working with other potentially challenging populations, such as people with  
6 intellectual disabilities (Noone & Hastings, 2009).

7           Understanding the lived experiences of staff in ED services is important given that the  
8 clinician-client alliance has been shown to affect treatment outcomes (Graves et al., 2017).  
9 Several existing reviews have examined this topic. In a mixed-methods review of  
10 knowledge, attitudes and perceived challenges among HCPs working with people with EDs,  
11 Seah et al. (2017) identified issues of limited knowledge and confidence, negative attitudes,  
12 service-user non-adherence, high workloads, miscommunication among teams, and being  
13 personally affected by the work. Thompson-Brenner, Satir, Franko, and Herzog (2012)  
14 conducted a mixed-methods review on HCPs' reactions to people with EDs and highlighted  
15 feelings of worry, frustration, hopelessness and incompetence. Employing thematic  
16 synthesis, Sibeoni, Orri, Lachal, Moro and Revah-Levy (2017) explored views of the  
17 treatment of adolescent AN and found that HCPs reported focusing on weight gain and  
18 behaviors, removing control to maintain physical safety, and struggling to develop  
19 therapeutic relationships due to mistrust, perceived manipulation, and a battle for control.

20           Given that these reviews lacked detail, all but one were aggregative, and the  
21 interpretative synthesis by Sibeoni et al. (2017) focused on one ED and age group, a meta-  
22 ethnography was planned on the lived experiences of diverse HCPs caring for service users of  
23 all ages with different EDs. Whereas aggregative reviews summarize existing literature in an  
24 additive manner, meta-ethnography goes beyond the original data to develop new  
25 understandings (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009) by building an explanatory theory or model

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1 (Bondas & Hall, 2007<sup>a</sup>; Walsh & Downe, 2005). All EDs were incorporated in the search  
2 terms because they are often grouped in the literature; this grouping accords with the  
3 transdiagnostic model of AN, BN and most Other Specified Feeding and Eating Disorders  
4 and Unspecified Feeding and Eating Disorders as sharing a core psychopathology of over-  
5 evaluation of the importance of eating, shape and weight, and their control (Fairburn, 2008).  
6 The definition of lived experience that guided study selection was: “The detailed, nuanced,  
7 and subjective experience, including individual perceptions, meanings, understandings,  
8 descriptions, and felt somatic sense of an experience from the first-hand point of view of a  
9 particular person” (Mertens, 2005, as cited in Palmer, 2015, p.123).

10 The meta-ethnography aimed to generate a model of the processes involved in  
11 working with people with EDs, drawn from the lived experiences of HCPs, to improve  
12 clinical practice and inform service development.

### 13 **Method**

#### 14 **Systematic literature search**

15 The following databases were systematically searched in March 2018: PsycINFO,  
16 PubMed, and Web of Science. Three categories of search terms – eating disorders,  
17 experiences and professionals – were combined using Boolean operators. No date restriction  
18 was employed. Reference lists of relevant studies were manually searched for additional  
19 papers.

#### 20 **Selecting studies**

21 Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied by the lead author (MG) to identify  
22 relevant studies. The inclusion criteria were: (a) peer-reviewed empirical studies; (b) studies  
23 employing a qualitative or mixed-methods design (provided the qualitative results were  
24 reported separately); (c) studies focusing on EDs; (d) studies whose participants included  
25 HCPs (i.e., any worker in a healthcare setting involved in the direct care and/or treatment of

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1 service users), and (e) studies focusing on the lived experience of working with people with  
2 EDs. The exclusion criteria were: (a) studies in languages other than English, and (b) book  
3 chapters, books, book reviews, dissertations, opinion pieces, conference presentations, and  
4 meeting abstracts.

5 Figure 1 illustrates the search strategy and process for selecting studies. The lead  
6 author looked at all references (during the screening of titles and abstracts, and by reading  
7 full texts where applicable), and thirty per cent of articles selected to be read in full were  
8 independently screened by other members of the research team. Two discrepancies in  
9 decisions were resolved via discussion and re-reading articles, leading to the exclusion of an  
10 additional article.

11

12 Figure 1 to go about here

13

### 14 **Quality appraisal**

15 To provide a guide regarding their relative rigor, the methodological quality of the  
16 included studies was assessed by MG using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP;  
17 2010) checklist for qualitative research, a tool employed in previous syntheses of qualitative  
18 ED studies (e.g., Espindola & Blay, 2009; Fox, Dean, & Whittlesea, 2015). The checklist has  
19 10 criteria, so each study was awarded a score out of 10, with half-points granted if a  
20 criterion were partially fulfilled. In the absence of standard protocols for mixed-methods  
21 studies, the qualitative components of studies of this type were evaluated using the CASP  
22 checklist for qualitative studies. This review followed Fox et al. (2015) in classifying studies  
23 from A to C, with A denoting studies scoring 8.5 or above and carrying a low likelihood of  
24 methodological flaws; B signifying studies scoring five to eight with a moderate likelihood of



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1 methodological flaws, and C indicating a score of less than five and a high likelihood of  
2 methodological flaws. Twenty per cent of included studies were independently rated by other  
3 members of the research team using the CASP checklist. There was unanimous agreement  
4 regarding five studies and there were minor discrepancies with two; discrepancies were  
5 resolved via discussion. Table 1 shows the CASP ratings.

6

7

Table 1 to go about here

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### 9 **Data synthesis**

10 Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnographic method was employed because we  
11 sought to develop a new conceptual understanding of the topic by configuring existing data.  
12 Meta-ethnography is well-established (Bondas & Hall, 2007<sup>b</sup>) and entails the following  
13 phases:

- 14 1. Getting started: An area of intellectual interest was identified (i.e., the lived  
15 experiences of HCPs working with people with EDs).
- 16 2. Deciding which studies to include: Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, and  
17 relevant search terms employed in a range of databases (Figure 1).
- 18 3. Reading the studies: Included articles were read multiple times to identify and extract  
19 methodological features, demographic information, and key concepts.
- 20 4. Determining how the studies are related: The key concepts in each study were closely  
21 compared to decide relationships between them. At this stage, accounts are either  
22 deemed directly comparable and capable of being "reciprocally translated" into one  
23 another; in opposition to each other and suited to "refutational translation", and/or  
24 cumulatively representative of a "line of argument" that "puts any similarities and  
25 dissimilarities into a new interpretive context" (Noblit & Hare, 1988, p.64).

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- 1 5. Translating the studies into one another: Reciprocal translation was used to identify  
2 third-order concepts (our interpretations of the original authors' interpretations) that  
3 captured similarities across studies. As there were no contradictions between  
4 findings, refutational translation was not necessary.
- 5 6. Synthesizing translations: Following reciprocal translation, the concepts were  
6 organized into a conceptual framework, which represented a new interpretation and  
7 line of argument.
- 8 7. Expressing the synthesis: The synthesis was elaborated via narrative and diagram  
9 (Figure 2).

10 Throughout, the meta-ethnography was regularly discussed among the research team. An  
11 inductive approach was employed, allowing findings to emerge from the data rather than be  
12 determined by an a priori theoretical framework (Dillaway, Lysack, & Luborsky, 2017).

### 13 **Results**

#### 14 **Quality assessment**

15 All studies were classified as A or B, with an average rating of 7.74. The primary  
16 reasons for losing points were not stating/justifying the research design; not providing a  
17 rationale for the method of data collection; lack of reflexivity, and presenting insufficient data  
18 to support findings; this may reflect limited word-counts rather than deficiencies in execution  
19 (Walsh & Downe, 2006). The overall score and classification for each study are included in  
20 Table 2. Given that all studies were rated B or above, and in line with other meta-syntheses  
21 in the field (Espindola & Blay, 2009; Sibeoni et al., 2017), no studies were excluded on the  
22 basis of the quality ratings.

#### 23 **Characteristics of the included studies**

24 Across the 37 studies, data were collected from 769 HCPs. They included nurses,  
25 psychologists, psychiatrists, occupational therapists, dietitians, general practitioners, and

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1 medical providers such as gynecologists. Nurses were well represented in studies with mixed  
2 samples and there were nine studies with solely nurse participants. Two studies exclusively  
3 involved HCPs with a history of an ED. Across the studies that did not specify personal  
4 experience as an inclusion criterion and reported the number of participants who disclosed  
5 such experience, 43.6% of HCPs were stated to have a personal history of an ED. Across the  
6 studies in which the gender composition of participants was discernible, 91.4% were female.  
7 Twenty-six studies centered on experiences of working with people with EDs; the remaining  
8 11 focused on experiences of working with AN. Eight studies related specifically to work  
9 with adolescents. Sixteen studies recruited exclusively from an inpatient setting. Included  
10 studies were undertaken in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Tasmania,  
11 the UK, and the USA. Most data collection proceeded via interview (generally semi-  
12 structured). Authors commonly employed thematic analysis. Key characteristics of included  
13 studies are shown in Table 2. Despite variety in the methodologies of included studies, and  
14 the range of disciplines, settings and locations represented, there was considerable  
15 concordance across accounts. However, as will be outlined below, some differences were  
16 apparent according to experience level, setting, and professional background.

17

18 [Table 2 to go about here](#)

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### 20 **Meta-ethnography findings**

21 The stages of analysis outlined above led to the development of a key concept to  
22 depict the lived experience of working with people with EDs: “Coping with caring without  
23 curing.” This described how a combination of treatment refusal, chronicity, systemic  
24 challenges and/or personal factors confronted HCPs with the fact that the help they offer

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1 people with EDs may be unwanted and/or insufficient. It resulted in a sense of dissonance –  
2 a mismatch between their aspiration to help, and the reality. HCPs could either defend against  
3 this dissonance, or face it with courage and humanity. This key concept was underpinned by  
4 the three concepts that will now be presented. The number of studies that endorsed each  
5 concept and sub-theme is represented in Table 3.

### 6 ***Concept 1: The dissonance and discomfort of being a helper struggling to help***

7 This concept, identified in 33 studies, describes the frustration, helplessness and  
8 distress that often resulted from efforts to assist people with EDs, alongside a sense of  
9 scrutiny in the helping role linked to the watchfulness of service users. Together, these  
10 experiences represented a painful dissonance between the expectation and reality of  
11 caregiving.

### 12 **Emotionally draining work.**

13 In 29 studies, participants reported that their work with individuals with EDs was  
14 “emotionally draining” (treatment provider; Warren et al., 2012, p.183) in the context of high  
15 levels of resistance and relapse, the shock of emaciation, feeling manipulated by service  
16 users, and difficulties with other professionals and families. Many clinicians described  
17 experiencing frustration, and some reported anger, in response to service users’ rejection of  
18 treatment, denial, and relapse: “I looked after a girl who used to rip out the naso gastric  
19 feeding] tube....After some time, you would get feelings of immense anger and frustration”  
20 (health professional; Walker & Lloyd, 2011, p.142). Cameron et al. (1997) noted that “the  
21 frustration appeared to be linked to the inability of HCPs to control the progress of the illness,  
22 about ‘not being able to do enough’” (p.28). The emaciation of service users elicited fear: “I  
23 can be scared and sad for not only their quality of life but the risk of a patient dying”  
24 (treatment provider; Warren et al., 2008, p.39). Some participants felt manipulated and/or

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1 attacked by service users, creating a difficult dynamic: “It’s the manipulation. You think it’s  
2 a personal attack against you” (nurse; Carter et al., 2012, p.551).

3 Interactions with service users’ families could be stressful if, for example, they were  
4 in denial about the ED (Harken et al., 2017). Difficulties with colleagues were also reported  
5 to add to the emotional demands: “We are forcing kids to do things that we do not  
6 understand. The doctors are making these decisions” (nurse; Micevski & McCann, 2005,  
7 p.110). Perceived lack of understanding among peers caused frustration: “The most  
8 uncomfortable thing for me is the lack of education of other people around me....in particular  
9 the physicians” (dietitian nutritionist; Trammell et al., 2016, p.79). One participant described  
10 the emotional toll of “caring without curing” (King & Turner, 2000, p.145) as follows:  
11 “Medicine is easy when you can just prescribe something and then they are better...but  
12 difficult sometimes when you have to put a lot of emotion into looking after them and  
13 sometimes you don’t seem to get anywhere” (general practitioner; Reid, Williams, &  
14 Hammersley, 2010, p.6).

### 15 **Feeling helpless and deskilled.**

16 Linked to high levels of relapse and resistance, HCPs in 21 studies described feeling  
17 deskilled and ill-equipped to help service users: “When I got to my internship and I did see  
18 EDs, it sort of scared me. I didn’t know what to do” (dietitian nutritionist; Trammell et al.,  
19 2016, p.78). A sense of helplessness was more apparent in studies involving HCPs without  
20 specialist ED experience. One participant described the dissonance of feeling helpless within  
21 a helping role as follows: “We are fixers and doers by our nature, that’s why we get into the  
22 profession that we do, so to not have an immediate answer is difficult” (medical provider;  
23 Linville et al., 2010, p.119). For a minority of HCPs, feeling helpless led to self-judgment:  
24 “Most of the time you feel you are going round and round in circles so it makes you feel like  
25 a useless therapist” (health professional; Walker & Lloyd, 2011, p.386). The data suggested

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1 that organizational and sociocultural factors contributed to participants' sense of limited  
2 power to help. Lack of time, the most common systemic problem, particularly affected those  
3 in primary care: "You can't even scratch the surface" (general practitioner; Reid, Williams, &  
4 Hammersley, 2010, p.7). At a macro-level, sociocultural pressure compounded HCPs' sense  
5 of helplessness to effect change: "We often feel like we are fighting a losing battle when they  
6 are exposed much more consistently to messages that contradict what we promote" (treatment  
7 provider; Warren et al., 2012, p.188).

### 8 **Watching and being watched.**

9 In 13 studies, the necessity of close observation of service users – particularly in  
10 inpatient environments (Akgül et al., 2016) – and a sense of being observed in turn, resulted  
11 in interpersonal mistrust amid a culture of surveillance. Participants described feeling  
12 awkward about intently monitoring service users to prevent ED behaviors: "They have to  
13 have somebody sitting in their room all day long with them...I feel uncomfortable for them"  
14 (nurse; Harken et al., 2017, p.e38). Some noted that this entailed a lot of work: "General  
15 psychiatric is easier...there's [fewer things] to look out for...Compared to the eating disorder  
16 is how you eat, what you eat, what you drink, how much you drink, where are you, what you  
17 doing...everything" (nurse; Seah et al., 2018, p.141). Participants articulated a feeling that  
18 their behaviors and/or appearance were scrutinized by service users, resulting in fear about  
19 saying or doing the wrong thing, particularly when inexperienced. For a minority of HCPs,  
20 the sense of scrutiny led to self-consciousness: "I feel like they are really watching me; I was  
21 trying to drink really normal" (staff member of ED unit; Long et al., 2012, p.244). Those  
22 with a personal history of an ED reported an additional layer of scrutiny, from other  
23 professionals; some of Williams and Haverkamp's (2015) participants described unhelpful  
24 interactions with colleagues, such as being questioned about weight loss.

### 25 **Moral distress.**

1            **Feeling unable to help and in conflict with service users generated “dissonance”**  
2 **(ED therapist; Williams & Haverkamp, 2015, p.405) for HCPs accustomed to providing**  
3 **valuable and valued care**, across 10 studies. This could lead to self-judgment for the  
4 perceived violation of their core values, as illustrated in the following quotation: “My heart  
5 just doesn’t warm to them any more...Disgusting – sad you know, that’s not a nurse” (nurse;  
6 King & Turner, 2000, p.142). In some cases, disempowering service users – to preserve their  
7 physical safety – led to self-questioning: “I didn’t want this role, I’ve always fancied myself  
8 as being quite therapeutic and collaborative” (nurse; Snell et al., 2010, p.354). Moral distress  
9 was most prevalent among, but not unique to, nurses.

10    ***Concept 2: Defending against the dissonance***

11            This concept, evident in 23 studies, conveyed the experience of some HCPs of  
12 avoiding, blaming, and battling service users. These coping strategies could defend against  
13 the dissonance of caring without curing by blocking it out or attributing “the problem” to  
14 service users, but simultaneously could exacerbate moral distress due to the loss of  
15 unconditional positive regard.

16            **Avoiding and distancing.**

17            Across 17 studies, there was a tendency among some HCPs, particularly nurses, to  
18 unconsciously or consciously avoid negative emotions, conflict, and/or association with  
19 service users. For example, Ramjan (2004) reported that some nurses requested not to work  
20 with adolescents with AN to distance themselves from difficult interactions. “Shutting off”  
21 and being task-oriented was another strategy employed by HCPs: “You just close off  
22 everything else and just take that fixed view that yes, you’re going to eat” (clinical nurse  
23 specialist; Jarman et al., 1997, p.148). This could reduce frustration and distress temporarily,  
24 but sometimes led to dehumanization of service users: “They become a set of symptoms and  
25 things to monitor and measure” (nurse; Davey et al., 2014, p.63). Some clinicians reported

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1 binge eating to evade burnout (Warren et al., 2012), which can be understood as avoidance of  
2 emotional pain. Others used their diet to distance themselves from service users: “I find  
3 myself going to an extreme, at times, of eating whatever I want and thinking it is bad to ‘eat  
4 healthy.’ I feel like I try to compensate for my clients’ eating-disordered views” (treatment  
5 provider; Warren et al., 2008, p.37). Cameron et al. (1997) noted that participants construed  
6 people with EDs as “other” to “exclude them from the domain of socially acceptable eating  
7 patterns, in which most participants located themselves” (p.27). Similarly, some HCPs with a  
8 personal history of ED emphasized the “normality” of their relationship with food and their  
9 bodies (Rance et al., 2010; Trammell et al., 2017), in what was interpreted by Rance et al.  
10 (2010) as a binary view of recovery that entailed avoidance of shared humanity with service  
11 users. One therapist described how non-disclosure at work of her personal history of ED  
12 created “dissonance” due to the mismatch between her secrecy and her anti-stigma message  
13 to service users (Williams & Haverkamp, 2015, p.405).

### 14 **Battle and blame.**

15 In 11 studies, there was evidence of HCPs blaming clients and/or regarding  
16 themselves as waging battle with “rebellious and dominating” service users (Long et al.,  
17 2012, p.244). Comparisons of clinicians to figures of authority jarred with the notion of  
18 collaborative care: “We were just like sergeant majors, we thought we were. Standing over  
19 them telling them what to do” (nurse; King & Turner, 2000, p.142). King and Turner (2000)  
20 remarked that HCPs pathologized typical adolescent behaviors, and service users were  
21 dismissed as “vain” by a participant in Walker and Lloyd (2011). Ramjan (2004) noted a  
22 tendency to judge service users as responsible for their distress, reflected in the prison  
23 metaphor the participants employed, which cast clients as criminals. Cameron et al. (1997)  
24 highlighted that the “moralizing discourse” employed by participants constructed individuals  
25 with EDs as “difficult people, rather than as people with a difficult illness” (p.29). While a



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1 minority of clinicians were unperturbed by this dynamic, for many it was inimical to their  
2 view of themselves as caring professionals.

### 3 ***Concept 3: Accepting the dissonance to provide safe and compassionate care***

4 This concept, depicted in 34 studies, described some HCPs' efforts to face the reality  
5 of caring without curing, without blaming or avoiding service users. This entailed adopting a  
6 balanced and flexible approach that was responsive to service users' needs, and their own. It  
7 also required tolerating negative emotions, uncertainty and fallibility to provide  
8 compassionate care in the knowledge that it may not be perceived by service users as helpful,  
9 and may be rejected altogether.

### 10 **Balance and flexibility.**

11 Participants in 17 studies stressed the importance of balance and flexibility.

12 Brinchmann et al. (2017) described therapists in their study as navigating a "golden middle

13 way" between extremes to create a safe environment for service users that promoted

14 development. Balance was also evident in the depiction of effective HCPs as "having one

15 arm around the client while kicking them in the butt" (therapist; Oyer et al., 2016, p.128-9).

16 This approach involved taking control where necessary and then "gradually giving service

17 users bits of control back, as and when we think [they] can cope with that" (social worker;

18 Jarman et al., 1997, p.145). While participants saw rules as important to preserve safety, they

19 emphasized the therapeutic value of flexibility, for example in adapting ethical codes to suit

20 the cultural context (Tan et al., 2013). However, flexibility was anxiety-provoking because it

21 meant clinicians could not "hide behind a method which can provide them with the safety and

22 security of being in control" (Jarman et al., 1997, p.147).

23 Balance was evident in HCPs remaining motivated to support change without

24 succumbing to rescue fantasies, and in their appreciation of the multifactorial influences on

25 their experiences (Reid, Williams, & Burr, 2010). Some HCPs recognized they did not bear

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1 sole responsibility for outcomes while continuing to work hard for service users, but this was  
2 highlighted as difficult: “It’s a constant challenge to find the balance between appropriate  
3 attention to my clients/doing everything I should and can for them, and letting go/bearing in  
4 mind that I can’t control what they do/what happens to them” (treatment provider; Warren et  
5 al., 2012, p.184).

### 6 **Mindful awareness, acceptance and self-observation.**

7 A balanced approach was facilitated by a mindful stance, which was articulated in 10  
8 studies. This manifested in HCPs taking an objective and non-judgmental perspective; facing  
9 and responding to reality, and trying to monitor, tolerate, reflect on and regulate their own  
10 behaviors, reactions and relationships: “At the end of the session, I reflected and realized that  
11 70% of the session was me talking AT them [the client]. I am a model of relationships, and if  
12 I am doing that....that is not therapeutic” (therapist; Oyer et al., 2016, p.132). Some HCPs  
13 mindfully observed and positively framed the watchfulness of service users as an opportunity  
14 to model a healthy relationship with one’s body (Palmer, 2015; Seah et al., 2018).  
15 Meanwhile, certain HCPs with a personal history of ED emphasized the need for self-  
16 awareness, including knowing one’s residual symptoms (Williams & Haverkamp, 2015).  
17 Supervision, team meetings and personal therapy were presented as fora that could promote a  
18 mindful stance.

### 19 **Connecting with common humanity.**

20 Many HCPs, across 24 studies, described connecting with their own humanity and  
21 that of service users in their work, as opposed to an us/them mentality. Connecting with  
22 common humanity comprised a recognition of the individuality of clients and HCPs; attuned  
23 responses; self-care; considered self-disclosure; a maternal stance, and finding reward in  
24 service users’ steps towards recovery. Humanity was evident in attuned responses to service  
25 users’ body language, facial expressions, and words: “I’ll just carry on walking beside

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1 them...that's helped me slow down and have that sort of metaphor of sort of walking  
2 alongside at their pace and using their language and just try to get into their life world"  
3 (nurse; Snell et al., 2010, p.354). Discussing topics other than their ED afforded a means of  
4 acknowledging the individuality of service users, and developing relationships founded on  
5 respect.

6 This respect was echoed in clinician accounts of battling alongside, rather than  
7 against, service users via externalizing the ED and viewing it as separate from the client.  
8 Meanwhile, self-care encompassed respect for one's own humanity, and awareness of the  
9 need to preserve wellbeing in order to show humanity to service users. HCPs saw limited  
10 self-disclosure as normalizing and facilitating relational safety: "I have talked about things  
11 going on in my life....it....puts them on your level" (nurse; Micevski & McCann, 2005,  
12 p.107). For some HCPs, predominantly nurses, maternalism – a protective and nurturing  
13 stance underpinned by genuine care for service users (Wright, 2015) – facilitated  
14 unconditional positive regard and reconciled the need for both empathetic support and  
15 boundaries. However, these aspects of maternalism were acknowledged to be "potentially  
16 conflictual," and it was suggested that nurses be supported to navigate this through  
17 supervision and training (Ryan et al., 2006, p.132).

### 18 **Humbly open to learning and support.**

19 Awareness of their own fallibility promoted efforts by HCPs in 22 studies to self-  
20 improve and engage with service users as equals. Humility was demonstrated by HCPs  
21 acknowledging their limitations and valuing support: "I couldn't imagine just doing it on my  
22 own...You need support" (healthcare professional; Macdonald et al., 2018, p.229). Humility  
23 was also apparent in HCPs demonstrating a desire for more training; providing a rationale for  
24 decisions; collaborating with service users and their families, and being open to learning from  
25 conflict and mistakes: "[Conflict] gives me the opportunity for self-reflection. I always

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1 appreciate it when the dietitian that I work with, challenges my thinking” (mental health  
2 professional; Dejesse & Zelman, 2013, p.198). Having personal history of ED was portrayed  
3 as facilitating humility and guarding against “an us/them kind of perspective” (therapist;  
4 Williams & Haverkamp, 2015, p.404).

### 5 **Line of argument**

6         Synthesizing the studies and reflecting on the resulting concepts generated a line of  
7 argument, which is illustrated in Figure 2. The central premise is that the lived experience of  
8 working with people with EDs is characterized by feeling drained, demoralized and on edge  
9 due to the subversion of HCPs’ usual role as helpers against a backdrop of complexity,  
10 chronicity, and treatment refusal. This foregrounds the limits of clinicians’ power to help,  
11 given that what they offer may not match the needs and/or wishes of service users. Problems  
12 may be beyond their power to resolve due to intrapersonal factors such as their level of  
13 experience; interpersonal factors such as relationships within the team; systemic factors such  
14 as the time available and cultural context, and/or the client’s readiness to change. For “fixers  
15 and doers,” a painful dissonance can result from the sense of powerlessness and subversion of  
16 role. One response is to defend against this by avoiding, battling, and blaming service users.  
17 While this may provide temporary relief, it can exacerbate the dissonance by violating the  
18 principle of unconditional positive regard, and is unlikely to be conducive to productive  
19 alliances with service users. Another response is to mindfully face the dissonance with  
20 humanity and humility, and seek balance. This involves remaining emotionally present and  
21 compassionate while acknowledging that ideal care is illusory, and at times actions that may  
22 make HCPs seem, and feel, like prison guards are necessary to preserve service users’ safety.  
23 This approach entails tolerance of uncertainty, and of not always being perceived as helpful  
24 by service users. However, it also facilitates the connection with clients that was the source

1 of many HCPs' enjoyment of the work, and overcomes the inhumane rigidity of avoidance  
2 and blame.

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Figure 2 to go about here

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### **Discussion**

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This is the first meta-ethnography to focus exclusively on HCPs' lived experiences of working with people with EDs. As well as supporting the findings of previous reviews (Salzmann-Erikson & Dahlén, 2017; Seah et al., 2017; Sibeoni et al., 2017; Thompson-Brenner et al., 2012), it yields new insights regarding the experiences of this work, and approaches to managing challenges in clinical practice. Findings from 37 studies, which spanned 21 years and were of moderate to high quality, were synthesized to produce a key concept of "Coping with caring without curing." The meta-ethnography describes how those working in ED services are limited in their capacity to help, which creates a painful dissonance that can impact on enjoyment of the job, perceptions of service users, and working alliances. This key and novel finding captures the tension inherent in being a professional helper and not knowing how to help, or having your offer of help rejected. Inherent in the key concept is a sense that, compared with many service users, people with EDs are harder to assist because they present with both physical and psychological risks (Seah et al., 2017; Walker & Lloyd, 2011), as well as high levels of complexity and treatment refusal (Franko & Rolfe, 1996; Golan et al., 2009; Kaplan & Garfinkel, 1999).

HCPs reported experiencing work with this client group as emotionally draining, which could lead to negative judgments of service users and themselves. This finding echoes Thompson-Brenner et al.'s (2012) review, with feelings of frustration and helplessness reported as common even among highly experienced therapists in this field (Franko & Rolfe,

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1 1996). A contributor to the emotional demands was the “culture of surveillance” that some  
2 HCPs, particularly those based in inpatient environments, encountered in their work. This  
3 sense of being scrutinized by clients, and in some cases colleagues, was a novel finding of  
4 this synthesis; it could lead to hostility and anxiety, thereby fueling negative attributions  
5 (Cromby & Harper, 2009).

6         The pull towards avoidance, battle and blame identified in this meta-ethnography  
7 echoes results from quantitative research showing that many HCPs have stigmatized views of  
8 people with EDs (Raveneau et al., 2014). According to the model of helping behavior  
9 proposed by Weiner (1986, as cited in Fox, Woodrow, & Leonard, 2012), negative  
10 attributions of service users' actions render helpful interventions less likely. Our meta-  
11 ethnography showed how such attributions can also lead to moral distress due to the conflict  
12 with HCPs' belief in the importance of unconditional positive regard. This is consistent with  
13 previous research showing that moral distress is correlated with lack of respect for patients  
14 (Lamiani, Borghi, & Argentero, 2017). Individuals with EDs value empathy from and  
15 collaboration with HCPs (Bezance & Holliday, 2013); however, as in Sibeoni et al. (2017),  
16 the data suggested that some clinicians struggle to maintain empathy and respect in their  
17 interactions with service users, and/or seek to avoid them. As well as compromising  
18 relationships with clients, engaging in avoidant behaviors is a risk factor for burnout (Fearon  
19 & Nicol, 2011).

20         Another contributor to the dissonance and discomfort of the work was feeling unable  
21 to help, which is also a risk factor for burnout (Fearon & Nicol, 2011) and is particularly  
22 challenging for HCPs with ‘rescue fantasies’ who may identify with the role of ideal carer  
23 (Golan et al., 2009). Such identification is arguably understandable in the context of a  
24 popular press that tends to depict HCPs as either selfless heroes or heartless villains (Barker,  
25 Cornwell, & Gishen, 2016). Moreover, people with EDs commonly seek ideal care (Bell,

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1 1999; DeLucia-Waack, 1999) and family members are frequently desperate for a “cure” (Fox  
2 et al., 2012). The perfectionism inherent in striving to be an ideal carer, and HCPs’  
3 avoidance of painful emotions, mirror the experiences of many people with EDs (DeLucia-  
4 Waack, 1999). It is possible that this parallel is linked to the high prevalence of personal  
5 history of ED among HCPs in the studies.

6 Our meta-ethnography highlighted coping strategies which appear conducive to HCP  
7 and service-user wellbeing. The emphasis on connecting with common humanity, and being  
8 humbly open to learning and support, are similar to the findings of Salzman-Erikson and  
9 Dahlén (2017), and Seah et al. (2017). What is novel is the notion of mindfully drawing on  
10 this humanity and humility to adopt a compassionate approach that eschews the rigidity of  
11 avoidance or blame. The importance of connecting with common humanity is underlined by  
12 research showing that service users appreciate being treated as individuals (Gulliksen et al.,  
13 2012). The attunement that characterizes common humanity is valuable given that people  
14 with EDs have high levels of insecure attachment (Zachrisson & Skårderud, 2010) and the  
15 negative effects of this can be mitigated by healthy, attuned therapeutic relationships  
16 (Ardovini, 2002). Mindful awareness, acceptance and self-observation involved HCPs  
17 accepting clients and themselves as human, and as and where they are. This aligns with  
18 evidence that acceptance-based interventions are helpful when working with challenging  
19 populations (Noone & Hastings, 2009).

20 A related healthy practice was taking a balanced and flexible approach, constituting  
21 imperfect but responsive care that allows for fallibility and humanity in oneself and others.  
22 This stance evokes the position of safe-uncertainty outlined by Mason (1993). According to  
23 his model, teams are motivated to remain in the safe-certain position. Correspondingly, the  
24 pressure to provide “ideal care” among HCPs working with people with EDs could push the  
25 team towards approaches seen as safe and certain (e.g., standardized protocols). However,

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1 Mason (1993) advocated a position of safe-uncertainty, “which is always in a state of flow”  
2 (p.35) and facilitates new ideas. It has been suggested that this position can free HCPs from  
3 the bind of needing to know the “final answer,” while supervision and consultation keep them  
4 safe in their practice (Fox et al., 2012). Tolerating imperfection is important given that self-  
5 expectations of staff have been identified as a critical factor in burnout (Scully, 1983;  
6 Freudenberger, 1980, as cited in Kleespies & Dettmer, 2000).

7 The findings of this meta-ethnography are consistent with a multifactorial view of  
8 HCPs’ experiences as reflecting an interaction between behaviors of individual clients and  
9 colleagues, systemic factors (Franko & Rolfe, 1996), and clinicians’ own practices and  
10 internal conflicts (Walker & Lloyd, 2011). Organizational pressures, such as inadequate  
11 staffing, contributed to the discrepancy between HCPs’ desire to provide valued care, and  
12 feeling they were unable to do so; lack of time is correlated with moral distress among HCPs  
13 (Lamiani et al., 2017). It is likely that staff with insufficient resources will seek a safe-certain  
14 position, rather than tolerate safe-uncertainty. Furthermore, it has been established that  
15 higher caseloads are associated with more negative staff reactions towards people with EDs  
16 (Franko & Rolfe, 1996). On a personal level, the capacity of HCPs to be attuned and provide  
17 relational safety depends, in part, on their own attachment security (Goodwin, 2003).

18 There were some differences in the data according to experience level, professional  
19 background, and setting. In the included studies, less experienced staff were portrayed as  
20 more fearful of saying the wrong thing, and helplessness was more prevalent among  
21 generalist as opposed to specialist practitioners. Inexperience has been linked to more  
22 negative reactions to service users with EDs in previous research (Franko & Rolfe, 1996). It  
23 has been suggested that the difficulties generalist staff experience in identifying and  
24 responding to EDs reflect the reluctance of clients to report them, and lack of knowledge  
25 about treatment options (Waller, Micali, & James, 2014). The systemic pressure of lack of



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1 time seemed to be felt most keenly in primary care, while the surveillance culture and  
2 frustrations around communication were predominantly reported in inpatient settings. The  
3 greater likelihood that nurses would engage in avoidance and blame, and adopt a maternal  
4 stance, may reflect their high level of contact with people with EDs and their involvement in  
5 implementing treatment protocols, positioning them both for intimacy with service users and  
6 becoming the object of their anger (Ryan et al., 2006; Zugai et al., 2018<sup>a</sup>; Zugai et al., 2018<sup>b</sup>).

7 Fox et al. (2012) highlighted the irony that it is generally the least experienced HCPs  
8 who spend most time with service users and receive the least containment in the form of  
9 space to formulate, process, and reflect. The need for reflective spaces in which to process  
10 moral distress in healthcare settings has been highlighted (Kälvemark, Höglund, Hansson,  
11 Westerholm, & Arnetz, 2004). It has been suggested that psychologists have an important  
12 role in helping ED teams to manage distress and frustration via facilitating reflective spaces;  
13 foregrounding the individuality and humanity of clients, and providing training to enhance  
14 clinical practice (Fox et al., 2012).

15 Given that the clinician-client relationship is known to affect treatment outcome  
16 (Graves et al., 2017) in this field, and low levels of wellbeing among HCPs are associated  
17 with poor safety outcomes (Hall, Johnson, Watt, Tsipa, & O'Connor, 2016), staff experiences  
18 of the work are a vital consideration for ED services. The findings of this meta-ethnography  
19 suggest that HCPs can make a valuable contribution and find reward if they pursue a  
20 balanced and humane approach, rather than unrealistically aspiring to be an ideal carer or  
21 embracing the punitive role of a prison guard. However, they are likely to need support and  
22 reflective space to tolerate the resulting uncertainty and ongoing internal conflict (Halton,  
23 2003).

24 **Limitations**

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1 As almost one-third of the included studies focused exclusively on AN, findings may  
2 be most pertinent to those working with this condition (Hage et al., 2017<sup>a</sup>; Ryan et al., 2006).  
3 Exclusion of unpublished studies may have led to the loss of information (Petticrew et al.,  
4 2008).

5 The fact that 11 of the included studies were identified from manual searching of  
6 reference lists, or by chance via background reading, raised concerns regarding the breadth of  
7 our search. It was identified that nine of these 11 studies would have been located by the  
8 original database searches if the ‘professionals’ category of search terms had been applied to  
9 study abstracts as well as titles. As a confirmatory check, the search was rerun in the  
10 databases with this update. Seven articles that were not identified by the previous search  
11 were deemed suitable for full screening; none of these met the inclusion criteria. Difficulty  
12 with locating qualitative papers through traditional databases (Booth, 2016), due to issues  
13 with MESH terms and filters, has led to a suggestion that other means of accessing them  
14 (e.g., hand searching and citation tracking) should be employed (Harris et al., 2018).  
15 Reviewers have been warned to extend searches beyond well-known databases to avoid  
16 missing journals with relevant information that are not referenced on them (Booth, 2016).

17 While critical appraisal has come to be an expected element of qualitative-evidence  
18 synthesis, it is contentious because of the epistemological variety of qualitative research, the  
19 diversity of appraisal tools, the variability in ratings within as well as between tools (Carroll  
20 & Booth, 2015; Dixon-Woods et al., 2007), and the fact that such tools do not measure  
21 conceptual quality (Toye et al., 2014). Applying the CASP checklist for qualitative studies to  
22 mixed-methods studies is problematic because the latter should be evaluated as a whole,  
23 given that the strengths of one strand can compensate for deficiencies of the other (Heyvaert,  
24 Hannes, Maes, & Onghena, 2013).

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1           The prevalence of convenience and purposive sampling among the included studies  
2 may have led to bias within individual papers. With convenience sampling, the researcher  
3 may not know how the sample characteristics compare with those of the population of  
4 interest, and thus there is a risk of inattention to sampling bias and its potential impact on  
5 findings (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Unlike convenience sampling, purposive  
6 sampling entails deliberate selection by the researcher and, while it is regarded as more  
7 credible than convenience sampling (Marshall, 1996), it is prone to the bias associated with  
8 researcher subjectivity. However, both purposive and convenience sampling are consistent  
9 with a qualitative approach, in which the aim is not to generalize findings by ensuring the  
10 sample is representative of the population but to produce a new and nuanced understanding of  
11 the topic; the objective is depth, rather than breadth (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).  
12 Moreover, combining data from a large number of studies ensured that a range of  
13 perspectives were incorporated in the final synthesis, lessening the potential impact of  
14 sampling bias within individual studies (Bearman & Dawson, 2013).

15           Given that the research team includes HCPs, some of whom have worked extensively  
16 with people with EDs, there was a risk we might view the data through the prism of our own  
17 experiences. We endeavored to be mindful of this potential bias in team meetings, and alert to  
18 differences in the data according to national context and service type. The risk of bias was  
19 alleviated by the fact that collectively the research team held experience of both psychology  
20 and nursing, working in the public and private sectors, and practicing in the UK and New  
21 Zealand.

### 22 **Clinical implications**

23           Findings from this meta-ethnography can be used to inform clinical practice by  
24 supporting HCPs to consider the personal impact of their work with EDs, and by raising  
25 awareness of and reflection on their coping strategies. HCPs could draw on the findings to

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1 help them provide safe and compassionate care, rather than avoid and blame people with  
2 EDs. This could lead to improvements in HCP wellbeing, job satisfaction, and treatment  
3 outcomes.

4 The findings suggest that providing time and space for HCPs working in the ED field  
5 to process the dissonance they experience would promote the wellbeing of clinicians and  
6 service users (Fox et al., 2012). This provision could take the form of supervision and/or  
7 reflective groups. As well as facilitating safe practice and providing containment,  
8 supervision can make HCPs feel valued and listened to (Fearon & Nicol, 2011); thus, it can  
9 alleviate damage to their self-concept associated with caring without curing. Supervision and  
10 reflective spaces may also support HCPs to adopt positions of safe-uncertainty, and select  
11 formulation- and evidence-based interventions rather than act in automatic pilot.

12 In primary care, Balint groups could enable HCPs to discuss stressors in a supportive  
13 environment (Rabinowitz, Kushnir, & Ribak, 1996), while in multidisciplinary teams  
14 Schwartz rounds could help clinicians to make sense of the emotional challenges of their  
15 work (Barker et al., 2016). Given that the surveillance culture and frustrations around  
16 communication were predominantly reported in studies with inpatient settings, reflective  
17 spaces and case conferences appear to be particularly valuable in these environments (Fox et  
18 al., 2012). In light of the fact that many HCPs with personal history of an ED experienced a  
19 sense of dissonance in relation to non-disclosure, it would be helpful for managers of ED  
20 services to promote a safe environment for sharing, perhaps by role modelling and asking in  
21 supervision about personal impacts of the work.

22 Introducing mindfulness practice for HCPs could promote the aware and accepting  
23 stance underpinning a balanced approach (Raab, 2014), and team formulation meetings could  
24 be used to foreground the individuality of service users and collectively support safe and  
25 compassionate care. The findings suggest that reducing systemic pressures (e.g., by

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1 increasing staffing levels) could decrease demands on HCPs, and mitigate against them  
2 feeling emotionally drained and helpless. In primary care, closer links with specialist ED  
3 services could make clinicians feel more empowered to help.

### 4 **Future research**

5 A future review could triangulate the findings of this synthesis with quantitative  
6 studies. It would be profitable to examine the impact of HCP experiences of dissonance on  
7 client outcomes. Future research could evaluate support mechanisms for HCPs working with  
8 people with EDs, for example a pre-post evaluation of introducing a structured reflective  
9 space such as a Balint group (Rabinowitz et al., 1996) or a Schwartz round (Barker et al.,  
10 2016). Further qualitative research on clinicians' experiences of working with people with  
11 binge eating disorder and BN would help to clarify whether the challenges reported in this  
12 review extend to all EDs.

### 13 **Conclusion**

14 This meta-ethnography highlights how HCPs experience working with people with  
15 EDs, namely the painful dissonance this can entail and how it can be managed in practice.  
16 The synthesis provides an interpretation that can help frontline staff and managers to  
17 understand and tackle the barriers to thriving in this work, so they can make a positive  
18 difference to service users. A new concept was developed from the reciprocal translation:  
19 "Coping with caring without curing." Furthermore, we produced a line-of-argument  
20 synthesis, expressed as a new model for understanding HCPs' experiences of working with  
21 people who have an ED.

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