

RESEARCH

INFORMATION

TITLE – Evaluation of a Skills-Based Program for Carers & Families of patients with Moderate to Severe Anorexia Nervosa.

AIMS

- CAREFREE is a 12-session online Schema Therapy-informed coaching programme, developed for carers of adults (18+) with moderate to severe anorexia nervosa, to reduce carer distress and improve family communication and functioning.
- To explore the needs of carers of adults with Moderate to Severe Anorexia Nervosa (MS-AN)
- To evaluate the feasibility, acceptability and preliminary effectiveness of a new (self-developed) programme for carers of adults with MS-AN.
- We used a multiple baseline case series, meaning we followed several groups of carers over time, taking repeated measures before, during and after the programme to see whether outcomes changed once the programme began.

KEY FINDINGS

- Carers of Adults with Moderate-Severe Anorexia Nervosa (MS-AN) experience significant psychosocial strain, with reductions in quality of life, interpersonal relationships and carers' own health and wellbeing.
- Preliminary findings in this pilot case series study indicated attendance at the CAREFREE programme was associated with significant improvements in: Carer burden, distress, depression, anxiety, family relationships and healthy communication styles. Several improvements were maintained at 3-month follow-up.
- The CAREFREE programme was endorsed as high in acceptability by carers with positive indirect impacts also described by their family member with MS-AN.

WHAT DID THE STUDY INVOLVE?

- In depth scientific review of the literature on past and current interventions for carers of adults with eating disorders
- Development of the CAREFREE programme including online programme materials, participant manual, videos
- Five separate 12-session online groups were delivered via videoconferencing by 2 clinical psychologists.
- Collection of quantitative and qualitative outcomes on feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness of the programme.
- Regular consultation with PPI group consisting of experts in eating disorders, carers and patients with MS-AN. The PPI group contributed to the refinement of the programme and study materials.



WHAT WERE THE RESULTS AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

Phase 1 Feasibility

- 72 participants were screened for eligibility, 63 consented to participate, 53 commenced the programme. 36 attended > 75% of sessions, 34 completed end-point measures
- The intervention showed acceptable retention and completion of data, comparable to other skills-based interventions for carers AN.
- Focus group qualitative data indicated high levels of satisfaction and reductions in distress associated with attendance.

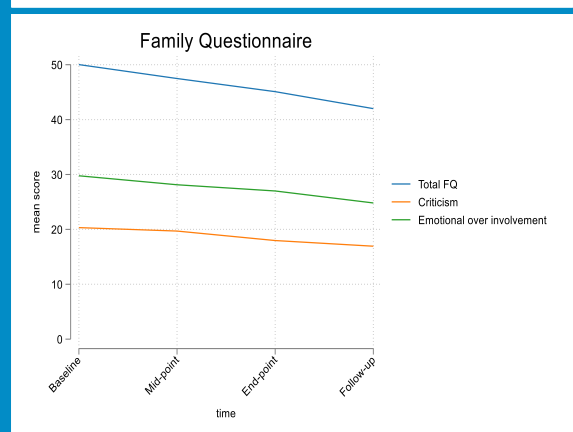
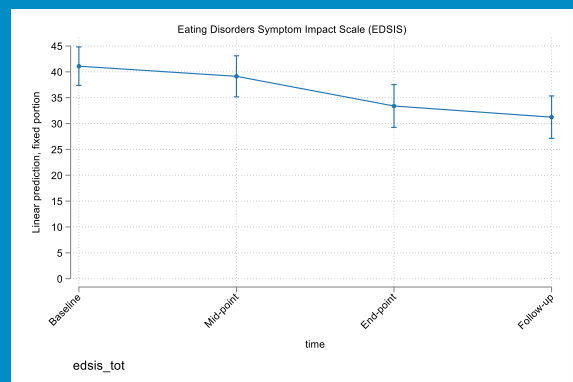
Phase 2: Clinical Outcomes:

- There was progressive therapeutic change across the 12-week programme (and at 3-month follow-up after the programme).
- The **primary outcome** of carer’s distress saw significant improvement in every area measured, including managing nutritional situations, dealing with dysregulated behaviours, caregiving guilt, and social isolation.
- **Secondary outcomes** showed significant improvements in family functioning and communication, with reductions in expressed emotion, criticism, and insecure attachment.
- Caregiver symptoms of depression and anxiety reduced significantly.

Eating Disorder Symptom Impact Scale (EDSIS): There were statistically significant reductions in carer distress, guilt and social isolation between pre to post- (and pre to 3 month follow-up).

Family Functioning significantly improved between baseline and 3 month follow-up, with reductions in both emotional overinvolvement and criticism.

* Baseline, mid-point, end-point and follow-up refer to 0, 6, 12 and 24 weeks





WHAT IMPACT COULD THE FINDINGS HAVE?

Patients

- Findings support testing CAREFREE in a large-scale clinical trial (a fair experiment) to explore potential benefits to carers and their family members with MS-AN
- If successful, this intervention could be rolled out to carers across Scotland as a standard intervention

Policy

- National guidelines have called for delivery of greater support for carers of people with eating disorders. This programme has the potential to be delivered sustainably and cost-effectively across health boards as a standard intervention for carers of adults with AN.

Practice

- CAREFREE has potential to fill a gap for carers of people with AN through provision of knowledge and skills, enabling them to improve both their own and their loved one's quality of life and communication and wellbeing. This may be particularly relevant for carers in areas of Scotland with limited specialist eating disorder provision.



HOW WILL THE OUTCOMES BE DISSEMINATED?

- Publication in 2-4 scientific journals and at academic conferences. Two publications have already been submitted to peer reviewed journals, with a further two in preparation.
- Publication of information online, through NHS Eating Disorder Services and eating disorder charities.
- Public-facing summaries for carers and families are also planned.



CONCLUSION

- Carers of adults with moderate to severe Anorexia Nervosa experience high levels of distress which can impact their quality of life and relationships with loved ones.
- The CAREFREE programme delivered via videoconferencing is practically feasible and acceptable.
- Preliminary evidence indicates this intervention leads to improvements in carers levels of distress and family functioning, facilitating an environment which may be more conducive to recovery in patients with AN.
- These findings are preliminary and require testing in a larger controlled trial.



RESEARCH TEAM & CONTACT

NAMES: Susan Simpson, Emma Mawdsley, Lesley Symon, Alasdair Rutherford, Debbie Smith, Hazel Elliott, Ruth Lamont.



Email address:
simpsosg@gmail.com

Institution: NHS Forth Valley (in conjunction with NHS GG & C, NHS Lothian & University of Stirling)

Additional Information

CSO awarded £240,415. Project was completed on 31/7/2025