

Megan Mehnert

Eating Disorder Dietitian



My route into mental health/eating disorders/learning disabilities

I have always been interested in mental health and was fortunate to study a BSc. in Psychology (and in Marine Biology) at the University of Cape Town (2011-2014). Throughout my studies I did some part-time freelance work for a medico-legal psychologist which further grew my interest in human behaviour. I had always had an interest in dietetics as I had friends who had studied this and wanted to learn more about the link between food and health, science and psychology. I moved to the UK in 2015 and although my day job was unrelated to this (data technician), I found myself getting involved in local charities and volunteered as a Trustee for a local food education charity. I then finally made the decision to study a BSc. Human Nutrition and Dietetics at Cardiff Metropolitan University in 2018.

During my university dietetic placements, I asked to spend time in Mental Health and was fortunate to spend time both with the CAMHS and Adult Mental Health Teams, which gave me my first experience in disordered eating. I spent my final placement on the gastro ward in an acute A&E hospital and did outpatient gastro clinics. My final dissertation was titled An investigation into the link between cooking from scratch and vegetable consumption; a cross-sectional survey of adults. I entered this in the BDA Research Symposium (2022) and was pleased to win best abstract in the Public Health Stream.

A closer look at my role

I am now within my third year of being qualified as a dietitian and have just started a new job as a Band 6 Eating Disorders Dietitian within the FREED (First Episode Rapid Early Intervention for Eating Disorders) programme (Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership). Before that, I worked within inpatient and outpatient mental health in Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (NHS Wales). Whilst working in Wales I covered 2 mental health wards and a forensic ward and no week was the same! I was fortunate to have a supportive team and mentors with clinical and management supervision. I was also offered supervision from someone outside of my team, who offered wellbeing focused clinical supervision, where I was free to open up and discuss any element of my personal or work life to help me cope well with the emotional and psychological pressure the job can sometimes bring.

Within my new FREED role I work with 18-25 year olds who are within their first 3 years of receiving support for an eating disorder. As a team everyone works very well together and clinical conversations are always encouraged. There are also scheduled team reflections to help work through any challenging cases.

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The thing I'm most proud of

I am most proud of being able to offer dietetic support in a compassionate, non-judgemental way. And also, to have the time and support from the team to offer treatment that best suits the individuals we're working with.

Earning trust and building rapport with the people we work with is fundamental to achieve dietetic change and I love the nature of working with service users over multiple sessions to be able to do this. I find seeing their shift in mindset and seeing them grow physically and psychologically stronger very rewarding.

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How I want my future to look

I would love to be more involved in the new ARFID eating disorder pathway our team is working on, as well as gain qualifications in CBT-E or doing physical observations.

A key piece of advice for anyone considering a role like this one

I would recommend expressing your interest in mental health or eating disorders and even if you don't feel you've had direct mental health experience, draw on transferrable skills. You may be able to gain some experience shadowing either on placement or through your work. Even if you're not working in a mental health setting, you're likely to come across service users who are affected, whether they're receiving support or not. And it's always helpful to be aware of what language to use and how to offer support or signposting.

Asking questions and offering support by being kind, non-judgemental and validating goes a long way. BEAT UK is great for signposting, and the Centre for Clinical Interventions has useful resources.