

Management of Disordered Eating Behavior Risk in Clients Varies Amongst Outpatient Dietitians: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis

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Summary

We conducted a thematic analysis to better understand how client characteristics impact dietitian decisions to use apps with clients. We identified three client-related factors that influence app recommendation: motivation, tech/health literacy, and disordered eating behaviors. Additionally, we found that while dietitians consistently moved away from calorie-tracking apps in the face of certain client behaviors and characteristics, some chose to remove calorie-tracking apps from their practice altogether due to fear of disordered eating behavior development.

Nutrition Educator Competencies: 1.8, 8.7, 9.2

Introduction

- 62% of dietitians (RDNs) recommend apps to patients¹
- Health app users are generally:²⁻⁴
 - Younger age
 - Female
 - Higher education level
 - Higher income level
 - Speak English
 - Higher eHealth literacy

Research Goal

To explore the role of client characteristics in how outpatient dietitians use apps with clients.

Methods

Participants:	20 United States Registered Dietitians working in outpatient practice <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruited via internet searches, professional list-serves, social media
Data Collection:	20-60-minute semi-structured interviews transcribed verbatim <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Via videoconference, phone, or in-person • November 2019-July 2020
Data Analysis:	Inductive thematic analysis of client-related factors ⁵

Results

Participants spent between 2 and 42 years in practice, with the top practice areas being weight management, diabetes/pre-diabetes, and gastrointestinal disorders. Three client-related factors, motivation, health/tech literacy, and disordered eating behaviors, influenced a dietitian's decision to use apps with their clients. Of these factors, disordered eating behaviors impacted decisions most consistently, with dietitians altering or discontinuing app use when these behaviors were present.

Identifying unsuccessful client characteristics and disordered eating behaviors

Successful Users	Unsuccessful Users
"numbers person"	"extremely fixated on numbers"
"detail-oriented"	"obsessive"
"data driven"	"compulsively logging"
"organized"	"food relationship dysfunction"

Discerning between successful and unsuccessful users

Participants differentiated between successful and unsuccessful users by identifying signs of perfectionism and negative emotional responses in their clients.

"I don't ever want anybody to be perfect in the app. Like if you're logging every single day, and you haven't missed a day yet, like oh, that's a little - that's a little too much."

Differing responses to calorie-tracking apps when addressing concerning characteristics

While all participants avoided calorie-tracking apps when unsuccessful characteristics or disordered eating behaviors were already present, several dietitians explicitly avoided calorie-tracking app use for all clients (including those without these noted behaviors/characteristics), citing concerns regarding the risk of developing new disordered eating behaviors.

"That's the one I use for people that are just, a little, you know, that the numbers, like the macronutrient numbers and the calories, all that stresses them out."

Vs.

"I would argue for most people in America that it can actually lead to more disordered eating and dieting behavior which we see increases risk of eating disorders. So to me it's not really worth it."

Conclusion

- Dietitians decide to recommend an app based on specific client factors and characteristics
- Presence of disordered eating behaviors and other unsuccessful client characteristics consistently leads dietitians to avoid or alter app use.
- Dietitians disagree on whether calorie-tracking apps can cause these behaviors and characteristics, leading some to avoid these apps entirely.
- Future directions:
 - Further research on client characteristics and their impact on app success, including the relationship between apps and disordered eating behaviors
 - Evidence-based guidelines to advance dietetic practice

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