



## NORMAL In Schools

NORMAL In Schools is a national nonprofit organization that educates about eating disorders, the therapeutic impact of the arts and related issues such as body image, self esteem and family communication.

# Assessment of an Eating Disorder Intervention

Kaylee M. Dingman, David L. Vogel, Ph.D., Ashley H. Hackler, M.S.  
Iowa State University

## Abstract

Without treatment eating disorders can have negative affects on one's psychological and physical health. This study examines the effectiveness of an intervention on (1) raising awareness of eating disorders, (2) encouraging those with eating disorders to seek help, and (3) encouraging friends and family of someone with an eating disorder to talk to the individual about seeking help. Participants (N = 353) filled out surveys after the intervention (a performance about an individual experiencing an eating disorder and the impact on them and their family) to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the show in improving their understanding of eating disorders, their willingness to seek help, and their willingness to talk to a friend about seeking help for an eating disorder. Results showed that a majority of the participants felt the show increased their awareness of the affects of eating disorders, particularly on its effects on family members (39%). Results also showed that for individuals who were currently experiencing an eating disorder and had not yet sought help ( $n = 31$ ), 55% ( $n = 17$ ) reported being influenced to seek professional help by the intervention. The main reason participants who were currently experiencing an eating disorder reported no change in their willingness to seek help was they did not feel comfortable speaking about something personal with others. For participants who knew of a friend that had an eating disorder ( $n = 135$ ), 41% reported a willingness to talk with them about seeking help for their disorder after seeing the intervention. In all, these results suggests that the intervention is having some impact, particularly on influencing viewers to seek help and talk with others about seeking help. However, in order to reach those individuals unwilling to seek help, future efforts might also need to increasingly focus on the personal issues associated with eating disorders.

## Introduction

Five to ten percent of college students suffer from an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia (Kurth, Krahn, Nairn, & Drenowski, 1995; Stein, 1991). In addition, a number of individuals who do not meet the diagnostic criteria for an eating disorder according to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders- Fourth Edition-Revised* (APA, 2000), may engage in disordered eating behaviors that can lead to more severe problems if not treated (Meyer, 2005; Shisslak, Crago, & Estes, 1995). Yet, despite the high prevalence of disordered eating attitudes and behaviors (Fairburn & Beglin, 1990), only a small percentage of people actually seek professional help for eating-related issues (Cachelin, Rebeck, Veisel, & Striegel-Moore, 2001). As such, researchers have acknowledged the important need to better understand the specific reasons why women and men may avoid seeking help when experiencing symptoms associated with eating disorders (Meyer, 2001; Pike & Striegel-Moore, 1997) in order to design interventions that can effectively increase the likelihood of seeking help for an eating disorder.

Therefore, it is important to assess the effectiveness of interventions used in school settings as aimed at influencing perceptions of eating disorders in school settings. Such interventions may be particularly beneficial as researchers have found that early interventions are critical to the treatment of eating disorders (Kaminski & McNamara, 1996; Scarano & Kalodner-Martin, 1994). Therefore, the goal of this study was to assess the effectiveness of a specific intervention, NORMAL currently being implemented in school settings. It was hypothesized that the intervention would increase understanding of eating disorders, increase willingness for those with eating disorders to seek professional help, and increase willingness to talk to someone about seeking professional help for an eating disorder

## Method

### Participants

Participants (N=353) consisted of community members who attended the performance. Participants were informed of the performance through flyers posted on campus and through teachers and professors. The performance was performed in Midwestern locations including college campuses, high schools, and middle schools. Participants in this study, in terms of age, ranged from 10 years old to 47+ years of age. Ethnicity and gender were not reported.

### Measures

A one-page survey was administered to all individuals who attended each performance of NORMAL. The following are some of the questions included in the survey:

- Has your understanding about eating disorders shifted after watching NORMAL? If so, please describe.
- Have you ever struggled with an eating disorder? If so, did watching NORMAL affect your willingness to talk about these issues with a professional?
- Do you know someone who is struggling with an eating disorder? If so, did watching NORMAL affect your willingness to talk to them about seeking professional help?

### Performance

This study examines the reported impact of NORMAL on those who attended the performance. NORMAL is a national nonprofit arts-in-education organization to produce, develop, and implement programs and curricula that teach students of all ages about the devastating impact of eating disorders and the therapeutic impact of theatre. NORMAL is a rock and roll musical performed at various universities around the country, as well as performed at middle and high schools as part of the expanded NORMAL In Schools curriculum. It is the true story of Yvonne Adrian's daughter's struggle with an eating disorder and the effect it has on the family system. An analysis of this already-existing intervention will help researchers and clinicians develop increasingly effective interventions in the future.

### Procedure

The surveys were administered by the director of NORMAL, Robyn Hussa, at the end of each performance. IRB Approval was obtained granting permission for the researchers to examine the anonymous survey responses.

## Results

The results supported the hypothesis that the intervention would increase one's understanding of eating disorders. After viewing the intervention, 52% ( $n = 186$ ) of the participants answered 'yes.' to the question "Has your understanding about eating disorders shifted after watching NORMAL." A majority of the participants who answered 'yes' (39%;  $n = 72$ ) specifically felt it shifted their understanding of the affects that eating disorders have on family and friends. Another 29% ( $n = 54$ ) of the participants who answered 'yes' felt it increased their knowledge and understanding of the importance of eating disorders, while 25% ( $n = 46$ ) felt that it increased their awareness of the seriousness and severity of eating disorders.

The results also supported the hypothesis that the intervention, NORMAL, would increase willingness for those with eating disorders to seek professional help. Of the participants, 14% ( $n = 31$ ) who stated they were currently experiencing an eating disorder, 55% ( $n = 17$ ) reported they were more willing to seek help by the intervention. Of the participants ( $n = 14$ ) who stated they were not more willing, 29% ( $n = 5$ ) reported it was because they were in remission from an eating disorder and were not currently experiencing symptoms.

The results also supported the hypothesis that NORMAL would increase willingness to talk to someone about seeking professional help for an eating disorder. Forty six percent ( $n = 135$ ) of the viewers of the performance reported knowing someone with an eating disorder and 41% ( $n = 56$ ) of these individuals said the intervention increased their willingness to speak with the person they knew about seeking help. In turn, 14% ( $n = 19$ ) reported they were not more willing to discuss seeking help with the person they knew, with the main reasons being they did not know the person well enough or it was too uncomfortable to discuss. Finally, 25% ( $n = 34$ ) reported the person they knew was either already receiving help, no longer suffered from an eating disorder, or they already spoke with them about seeking help prior to the intervention.

## Discussion

This study is the first to assess the effectiveness of the intervention, NORMAL, in terms of increasing awareness, increasing willingness to seek help and encouraging others to seek help. The results show that the intervention is having an impact on its viewers, particularly influencing those with eating disorders to seek help and to speak with others about seeking professional help. Of those who reported they were more willing to encourage someone they know with an eating disorder to receive help, the main reason was they wanted to help them and explain the dangers associated with eating disorders. They also felt more comfortable and felt it taught them how to approach someone about seeking help. In all, the performance is having a powerful and positive impact on its viewers and encouraging help-seeking behaviors.

The questionnaires were somewhat limited with information, given the questions were stated in generalities rather than specifics. When asked if after watching NORMAL, has one's understanding of eating disorders shifted, it does not clearly ask the participant a single question. The viewer may interpret this in multiple ways, such as new learned facts about eating disorders or if their own personal opinion shifted. More direct questions may lead to a better understanding of the impression NORMAL is having on audience members.

After analyzing the open-ended responses from those who attended the performance, a better understanding about the effects the play is having, as well as where it may need improvements, will help guide future studies on this intervention. Therefore, future research is suggested to improve the show's efforts for those who are unwilling to seek help or unwilling to encourage others to seek help.

## References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.). Washington, DC: Author.
- Cachelin, F., Rebeck, R., Veisel, C., & Striegel-Moore, R. (2001). Barriers to treatment for eating disorders among ethnically diverse women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 30*, 269-278.
- Fairburn, C. G., & Beglin, S. J. (1990). Studies of epidemiology of bulimia nervosa. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 147*, 401-408.
- Kaminski, P. L., & McNamara, K. (1996). A treatment for college women at risk for bulimia: A controlled evaluation. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 74*, 288-294.
- Kurth, C. L., Krahn, D. D., Nairn, K., & Drenowski, A. (1995). The severity of dieting and bingeing behaviors in college women: interview validation of survey data. *Journal of Psychiatric Research, 29*, 211-225.
- Meyer, D. F. (2001). Help-seeking for eating disorders in female adolescents. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 15*, 23-36.
- Meyer, D. F. (2005). Psychological correlates of help seeking for eating-disorder symptoms in female college students. *Journal of College Counseling, 8*, 20-30.
- Pike, K. M., & Striegel-Moore, R. H. (1997). Disordered eating and eating disorders. In S. J. Gallant, G. P. Keita, & R. Royak-Shaler (Eds.), *Health care for women: Psychological, social, and behavioral influences* (pp. 97-114). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Scarano, G. M., & Kalodner-Martin, C. R. (1994). A description of the continuum of eating disorders: Implications for intervention and research. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 72*, 356-361.
- Shisslak, C. M., Crago, M., & Estes, L. S. (1995). The spectrum of eating disturbances. *International Journal of Eating Disorders, 18*, 209-219.
- Stein, D. M. (1991). The prevalence of bulimia: A review of empirical research. *Journal of Nutritional Education, 23*, 205-213.