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# Development of self-acceptance promotion program that focuses on eating disorder tendencies in adolescence and examination of its usefulness

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## Abstract

### Purpose:

In recent years, it has been observed that the onset of eating disorders is occurring at younger ages, which represents a growing concern. It has become clear that eating disorders tend to become more ubiquitous among junior high-school students as they advance in grade. It has suggested that preventive interventions that are based on physical and psychological aspects of adolescence are required. Despite the recognition of the necessity of such interventions in school settings, the current status is apathetic in terms of specific support methods to be sufficiently established. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to develop a program that promotes self-acceptance and focuses on eating disorder tendencies among junior high-school students. Specifically, the age groups where eating disorder onset is likely to occur, and to examine the usefulness of this program. An additional goal for this study was to incorporate in this program aspects of cognitive dissonance theory, which is said to be effective in the internalization of sociocultural and psychological factors as well as 'thinness' ideals, which are thought to be related to the development of eating disorders.

### Methods:

In the first stage of this study, an interview survey was conducted with people where at least 10 years have passed since they had diagnosed from eating disorders and is now in recovery; the purpose was to establish the extent of influence of sociocultural and psychological aspects on the factors influencing the onset of eating disorders. The qualitative integration method (KJ method) was used for the analytical method. Next, in the second stage, the program content was examined, using suggestions related to the factors influencing the onset of eating disorders obtained in the first stage, results of self-acceptance concept analysis, previous research on domestic and international eating disorder prevention, and previous research on the cognitive dissonance theory. Interactive formats such as group work were also incorporated into the structure of the program. In the third stage, this newly developed eating disorder prevention program was implemented in a group of healthy junior high-school students, and a comparative study was conducted on the pre- and post-implementation effects of this program. Eating behavior, internalization of the 'thinness' ideal, dissatisfaction with body shape, and self-acceptance scales were used as evaluation indicators for examining the

usefulness of the program. Repeated measure analysis of variance or the Friedman test was conducted according to the presence or absence of normal distribution of data in the comparative study of the effects of each evaluation indicator prior to intervention, immediately after intervention, and three months after intervention. Multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction were conducted for all time point combinations of the evaluation indicators for which significant differences were observed in these analyses. Furthermore, when trends in mean values of the evaluation indicators differed between sex, then comparisons at each time point were conducted using repeated measure analysis of variance. Both the first and third stages were conducted with the approval of the Toho University Faculty of Nursing research ethics review committee.

### **Results:**

The subjects of the first stage were four female who had been diagnosed with eating disorders when they were in junior or senior high school. Analysis results showed that the onset of eating disorders was influenced by an excessive reaction to evaluation from surrounding people and conflict within a family environment that does not accept the self as is. As a result, as the students lost weight, only the feeling of dissatisfaction and serious mental and physical disorders became apparent, and they faced a severe battle with this disorder in isolation. However, in such circumstances, changes in the families who adopt closeness gradually led to recovery, and the presence of trustworthy people provided mental support to confront the eating disorder consistently. Through these activities, the subjects cultivated the ability to change their behavior and accept others' reactions as well as experience the feelings acquired only as a result of recovery from an eating disorder. Therefore, it became clear that the onset of the eating disorder was largely influenced by both sociocultural factors and psychological factors. Furthermore, the evaluation of surrounding people and the extent of self-acceptance was associated with the onset of eating disorders. Which, suggested the need for appropriate media literacy acquisition and preventive interventions to encourage self-acceptance.

In the second stage, an intervention program was built based on these suggestions, as well as the results of previous research on self-acceptance concept analysis.

The subjects of the third stage were 35 first- and second-year junior high-school students in the Kanto region, of which 31 participated in all intervention programs were subject to analysis. As for the intervention effect, a significant effect was observed in the overall Body Dissatisfaction Screening Scale ( $F(2,90)=10.52, p=0.001$ ). Results of multiple comparisons showed that, when compared to the effect before the intervention, the effects immediately after intervention and three months after the intervention exhibited a significant decrease ( $p=0.003, p=0.008$ ). A significant effect was observed on the overall self-assessment scale for

junior high-school students ( $F(2,90)=9.75, p<0.001$ ), and results of multiple comparisons showed that, when compared to the effect before the intervention, the effects immediately after intervention and three months after the intervention exhibited a significant increase in the score ( $p<0.001, p=0.019$ ). This self-acceptance showed different tendencies by sex, with a significant effect on the personality self-subscale ( $F(2,66)=16.19, p<0.001$ ). There was also no statistically significant difference in eating behavior and internalization of the 'thinness' ideal. However, subjects made remarks about the difference between the ideal body shape and healthy body shape, and the risk of being too thin.

### **Discussion:**

The results indicated that interventions by this program had a certain effect on promoting improvements in eating disorder tendencies and self-acceptance. It is thought that, through this intervention, the experience of self-affirmation and the experience of acknowledging oneself and others with peers of the same age served as opportunities for the junior high-school students to become aware of their "self-identity" and "strengths". Meanwhile, there were aspects of the program which produced different outcomes between gender groups, including self-acceptance. Further study on gender-based intervention methods and long-term maintenance of effects is needed. It was also suggested that systematization and maintenance of support in preventive interventions in mental health, such as this program, require the provision of appropriate knowledge on mental illness and mental health to educational settings by specialists as well as the strengthening of multi-disciplinary collaboration to support the students.