

Wellness Lifestyle / Health & Wellness

Instagram eating disorder ‘recovery accounts’ offer support – but shouldn’t replace professional help, experts say

Social media is often blamed for fuelling some eating disorders, but it has also helped people who are recovering from anorexia, bulimia and binge eating

While social media recovery groups have helped some people, experts caution it should not replace professional treatment

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Type in the hashtags “edrecovery” or “eatingdisorderrecovery” on Instagram and more than 2 million posts show up. Most of these posts are made up of selfies, motivational quotes, photos of healthy meals and videos of people working out at the gym.

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The creators of these posts are men and women who are recovering from eating disorders (EDs) such as anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorder.

One such creator is Kara Park, who posts from the Instagram account [Karafaithpark](#). The 23-year-old American, who is of South Korean descent, was diagnosed with anorexia in 2018 while studying at university in California; she began treatment soon after. The recovery journey was lonely, she says, until she came across other ED sufferers on Instagram.

“The week I started my treatment, I randomly searched the hashtag ‘eatingdisorderrecovery’ to see what would come up. To my surprise, I discovered a whole community of people who had EDs and were in the process of healing. I felt

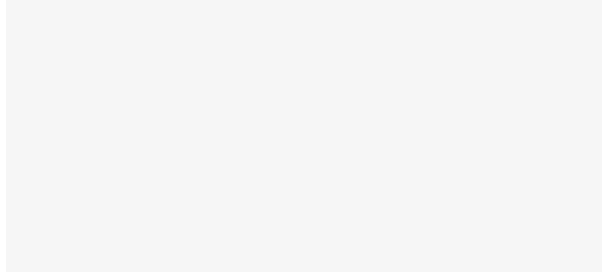
very encouraged scrolling through their accounts, reading their posts and learning about their recovery,” she says.

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Park was inspired to create her own “recovery account” on Instagram.

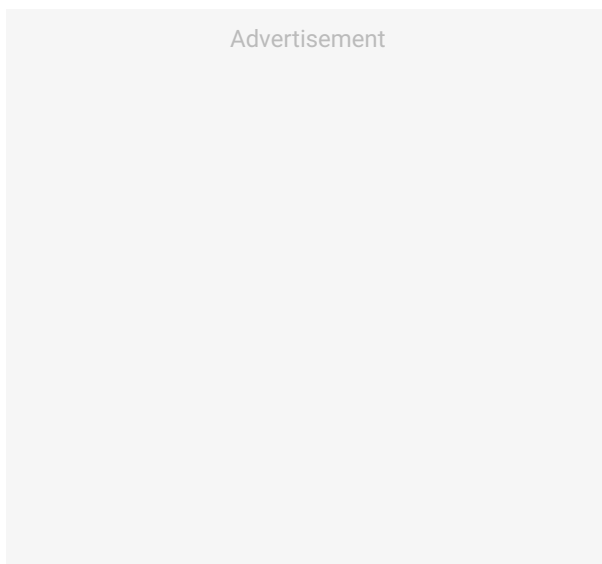
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“The clinic I was receiving treatment at was small and I had a hard time relating to the other patients, so I started an anonymous account, hoping to connect with the owners of some of the other recovery accounts,” she says.

“Going through treatment was really lonely and I couldn’t explain what it was like to my friends, so I would share my reflections online, several times a week.”

Sharing on social media played a significant role in Park’s recovery, though the way it helped her changed as she moved through the different stages of healing.



“When I started treatment, posting on Instagram helped me to voice my struggles and process what I was learning with the other patients, even though I didn’t really know who these patients were,” she says.



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“After adjusting to the treatment, I learned to utilise the support of my therapists and the benefits of processing with my fellow patients who understood my struggles. My Instagram account served as more of a recovery journal during this time.

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“After I was discharged from treatment, sharing on social media became the backbone of my recovery as my surroundings changed and I re-entered the world. While I wasn’t physically surrounded with support and my friends still didn’t really get it, my online community kept me accountable, and rereading my older posts reminded me of how far I had come.”



Recovering from anorexia felt lonely, so Park turned to Instagram to voice her struggles and share her progress. Photo: Handout

Social media has long been singled out for promoting impossible body standards and creating an environment that can exacerbate ED behaviours. But a 2016 study published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology* found that being a part of online ED support groups actually had a positive effect on members who were in recovery.

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Looking at transcripts from these groups, the researchers found that the online conversations helped members build a new shared “recovery identity”, which helped them talk about their EDs and treatment.



Eating normally is an important component of ED treatment and learning about others' healthy eating habits may empower ED sufferers to eat better

— Psychiatrist Dr Lim Boon Leng

A 2015 study published in *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* found that simply reading ED memoirs on websites of organisations that provide support for sufferers might help individuals who are in recovery. The participants, all women, reported more positive outcomes including hope, validation and social support.

Psychiatrist Dr Lim Boon Leng agrees that joining online ED support groups and following ED recovery accounts on social media can be helpful to individuals with EDs.

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“Eating normally is an important component of ED treatment and learning about others' healthy eating habits may empower ED sufferers to eat better,” says Lim, who works at Dr BL Lim Centre For Psychological Wellness in Singapore.

“These communities may help promote a healthy body image and encourage sufferers to seek professional treatment for their EDs. These communities also function as a ‘safe space’ for ED sufferers to discuss their feelings and experiences.”



Psychiatrist Dr Lim Boon Leng. Photo: Handout

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“There is still so much stigma surrounding mental illnesses like ED. Under normal circumstances, ED sufferers may not want to discuss their condition or recovery out of a fear of being judged. But when they are allowed to share their feelings anonymously, or use a nickname, they are more inclined to open up, and in the process, help others.”

What Lim cautions against, though, is using social media as a substitute for professional treatment, or forgoing professional counselling in favour of getting advice from other ED sufferers online.

“EDs, particularly anorexia nervosa, are dangerous and potentially fatal illnesses that can be chronic and relapsing,” he explains.

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“So while social media can help with the healing process, it is important to remember that what works for one person may not work for another, and following someone else’s advice may actually put you in harm’s way. If you have an ED, you should get professional help to prevent the condition from worsening as well as improve your long-term prognosis.”

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Dr Quratulain Zaidi, a clinical psychologist at MindnLife in Hong Kong, adds that treating EDs often requires a team of trained experts, such as a general practitioner, a psychiatrist, a psychologist and a nutritionist. Sometimes, inpatient care is also needed. Social media platforms and online support groups are simply no match for this kind of professional treatment.