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The Importance of Improving Cognitive Flexibility in Adolescents with Anorexia Nervosa: The Case for Cognitive Remediation Therapy

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Inefficiencies in executive functioning (EF), more specifically cognitive flexibility and an overly detailed processing style, are frequently observed in individuals with Anorexia Nervosa (AN) and have been identified as potential targets in treatment. Cognitive Remediation Therapy (CRT) is an adjunctive treatment approach specifically designed to have a positive impact on EF. Mainly evaluated in adults, CRT has been criticized for its perceived ineffectiveness in promoting weight restoration or directly reducing eating disorder symptoms. We argue that we need to refocus our conceptual framework for using CRT as an adjunctive treatment and specifically explore its potential benefit in adolescents. Adolescence is a critical window for EF development during which CRT has the potential to have the most impact. While it may not specifically ameliorate eating disorder symptoms and directly improve weight gain, CRT may mitigate the impact of malnutrition on adolescent brain development, reduce attrition rates in treatment, and improve cognitive flexibility and (indirectly) other maintaining factors, thereby improving global functioning. More research needs to be done to understand the development of EF in adolescents with AN and how best to employ CRT as an adjunctive treatment to support development and target maintaining factors. The current article broadly reviews findings on executive functioning inefficiencies in adolescents with AN and discusses the purpose and role of CRT in treating AN. Finally, we highlight key critiques of using CRT and pose questions for future research. Treatments targeting executive functioning in adolescents with AN are limited. We need to better understand how CRT can benefit adolescents in treatment. Increasing treatment options, including adjunctive treatments, is necessary to reduce the long-term impact of AN.

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