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IJED support for eating disorders research in the time of COVID-19

Abstract

This editorial reports on an anonymous survey question posed to eating disorders researchers about changes the *International Journal of Eating Disorders (IJED)* should implement to support the eating disorders research community affected by COVID-19. The editorial accompanies an *IJED* article that details responses to the larger survey focusing more broadly on COVID-19-related research disruptions. Survey invitations were sent to editorial board members of eating disorders journals, members of eating disorder scientific organizations (e.g., *Eating Disorders Research Society*), and individuals who provided at least three *IJED* reviews in the prior 12 months. We reviewed the responses of 187 participants and identified three categories of changes that: (a) had already been implemented by the journal, (b) cannot be implemented because they fall outside the scope of *IJED*, or (c) will be implemented in coming weeks or months. The latter category includes publishing topical COVID-19 papers, making some COVID-19-related content available open access, revising statistical guidelines, and issuing author guidance on reporting protocol changes caused by COVID-19-related disruptions. *IJED* recognizes the disruptive impacts that COVID-19 has on all activities in our field, including clinical work, teaching, and advocacy, and is committed to supporting authors during this difficult time while striving to publish high-quality research.

KEYWORDS

coronavirus, COVID-19, eating disorders, registered report, scientific research, scientific review

safety measures for staff and patients and most outpatient services have transitioned to delivering care via telehealth approaches. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, research institutions around the world have had to shut down laboratories and research offices involved in “nonessential” research to protect the research teams, their research participants, and the public from the spread of the infection. A recent *Lancet Psychiatry* editorial noted “In times of crisis, research might seem a low priority,” but the author then went on to underscore the vital importance of both initiating new studies specific to the pandemic and continuing existing lines of research (Editor, 2020). Research is needed to document and understand the full range of COVID-19-related disruptions on our field, and such efforts will benefit from attention to work in the mental health field more generally (Holmes et al., 2020). This editorial focuses on one facet: disruptions of eating disorders research.

While it is too soon to measure the longer-term impact of these closures on research programs and the people designing and executing the studies, already there is a growing literature anticipating impacts, sharing best practices for how to continue scientific work, and contemplating strategies to mitigate adverse effects (Servick, Cho, Guglielmi, Vogel, & Couzin-Frankel, 2020; Van Bavel, 2020; Yan, 2020). Scientific journals have an important place in the research ecosystem: they set quality standards or expectations for scientific rigor; they reflect, and at times, set trends for topics worth researching; and they provide a major platform for publishing scientific findings. Given that publications are the “coin of the realm” for academics, journals play an important role in researchers' careers. The *International Journal of Eating Disorders (IJED)* and members of its board long have embraced an author-centric ethos to maintain policies and practices that support authors (e.g., short review times; detailed and high-quality feedback; a range of manuscript types suitable for investigators across levels of research experience; workshops on publishing; and outreach to early career scholars).

Considering the extraordinary challenges brought on by the outbreak of COVID-19, the *IJED* Executive Committee (i.e., the Editor and Associate Editors) invited colleagues in the eating disorders field to share their experiences and concerns occasioned by the COVID-19-related disruptions, their thoughts about effective strategies for continuing research during the pandemic, and their suggestions of what the eating disorders community and *IJED* could do to support research during and beyond the crisis. Specifically, in April 2020, we sent survey invitations to editorial board members of three eating disorder journals (*IJED*, *Journal of Eating Disorders*, *European Eating*

The 2019 outbreak of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) has caused major disruptions across the world, and the field of eating disorders, of course, has not been immune to the sequelae. Inpatient or residential treatment services have had to institute major

Disorders Review); members of the Eating Disorders Research Society; members of the Special Interest Group for Early Career Investigators of the Academy for Eating Disorders; and ad hoc *IJED* reviewers who had provided at least three reviews in that past 12 months. Recipients were encouraged to share the survey link with other colleagues. We received 187 surveys with sufficiently complete data to permit examination. Detailed survey findings are described in a separate report (Weissman, Klump, & Rose, in press), except for responses to the question which is the focus of this editorial: “Please describe 1-3 changes *IJED* should make to support eating disorders researchers during and after COVID-19.”

There were 175 comments in response to this item. This editorial gives an account of our respondents' suggestions and how *IJED* is responding to these suggestions. We each independently read these comments and then, as a group, considered which suggestions should be implemented. Our goal was to identify any proposed changes (even if mentioned by only one person) that we believe hold promise to accomplish the *IJED*'s overarching goal of supporting authors and the field. Our responses to the findings are organized into three categories: (a) changes that were suggested that *IJED* has already implemented, (b) changes that were suggested and reasons why they cannot be implemented, and (c) changes we are working toward implementing.

1 | CURRENTLY IMPLEMENTED INITIATIVES

The following policies currently are in effect:

1. *Longer/more flexible timeframes for authors needing to submit revisions.* Authors who are invited to revise their manuscript after review are advised of standard *IJED* revision deadlines (90 days for major revisions and 30 days for minor revisions), but they are also invited to contact the editor for an extension, if needed.
2. *Longer/more flexible submission deadlines for reviewers.* Messages inviting reviewers to evaluate original or revised manuscripts currently include a statement acknowledging that, due to COVID-19, reviewers may need more time than usual for providing an evaluation. Reviewers accepting a review assignment are advised that automated messages will continue to indicate a default turnaround of 14 days. However, deadlines are adjusted per reviewer request or, if reviewers ask for more than 4 weeks, the editor selects an alternative reviewer.
3. *Fast-tracking of COVID-19-related studies.* From submission to production, we are speeding up the handling of COVID-19-related manuscripts (as we do with other time-sensitive material). During the review stage, this means that editors will select reviewers who agree to the default review deadline of 14 days or less; authors are asked to agree to expedited resubmission deadlines as well, if possible.
4. *Conduct a study of COVID-19's impact on eating disorders research.* Our survey (Weissman et al., in press) represents our effort on behalf of the *IJED* to gain an initial sense of the pandemic's impact on eating disorders research. However, we invite our colleagues to pursue such research with an expanded focus regarding the domains to be examined and the timeframe for measuring impacts which, likely, will be long-term.
5. *Accept online data collection versus in-person collection.* *IJED* does not have an a priori prohibition against online data collection; the critical issue with any data collection approach is whether the sample is suitable for addressing the research question and whether the data were collected using reliable and valid approaches. Thus, we welcome high-quality studies that use online platforms to expand our knowledge about eating disorders.
6. *Maintain standards for publication.* We appreciate respondents' concern that we maintain our expectations for scientific rigor. *IJED* has a dedicated editorial board comprised of experts committed to upholding expectations of high quality and being knowledgeable of up-to-date research methodology.

2 | CHANGES RESPONDENTS SUGGESTED AND REASONS WHY THEY CANNOT BE IMPLEMENTED

1. *Special issue on COVID-19.* *IJED* welcomes COVID-19-related content, and we currently will fast-track such papers. We do not want to delay publishing time-sensitive content while awaiting enough papers to complete an entire issue.
2. *Increase the number of manuscripts published, particularly reviews, “idea” manuscripts, brief reports.* *IJED* no longer has an a priori limit of manuscripts that can be published, and the overall number of published manuscripts has gone up in recent years. That said, we do not anticipate a policy change toward a substantial increase in papers for the sake of an increase. We aspire to publish manuscripts that advance the scientific knowledge base needed to understand, prevent, and treat eating disorders and improve the lives of the people and communities affected by eating disorders.
3. *Publish the proceedings of eating disorders conferences.* Often, conference abstracts are based on partially completed studies or, less frequently, on research already submitted for publication. Moreover, conference proceedings typically do not provide enough information for readers to evaluate scientific rigor. We note that authors have a new option for publishing their research plans with *IJED* in the form of registered reports (for a recent example, see Manasse et al. [2020]). We encourage *IJED* authors to make use of the registered report format, particularly during the COVID-19 period when data collection may be stalled or halted.
4. *Relax the rigor and reproducibility standards for data collection occurring during COVID-19.* Although we will develop guidelines for how to report and evaluate COVID-19 disruptions (see below), we will not be using different evidentiary standards, as doing so would compromise the quality of data published in *IJED* and the quality of the science in the field at large.

5. *Suggestions that are out of scope for IJED.* Several respondents proposed changes to Wiley's business model (e.g., reducing subscription price) that are not under the control of the editors. Respondents also suggested that the journal should advocate for research funding, provide funding, or publish updates about funding opportunities. We share the conviction that more needs to be done to educate the public about the need for greater allocation of resources for research and practice. Although these funding initiatives are beyond the scope of the journal, we applaud the advocacy work accomplished by local and global organizations that secure funding for the field. We also thank our research colleagues who contribute to advocacy efforts by conducting rigorous research that provides the data needed to make the case for support, who take the time to share their expertise for actions such as lobbying governments, and who make charitable gifts in support of advocacy groups.

3 | CHANGES WE ARE WORKING TOWARD IMPLEMENTING

1. *Permitting manuscript submissions of COVID-19-related papers that do not fit IJED's standard manuscript types.* (e.g., papers that do not meet standards for systematic reviews or for research reports). *IJED* temporarily has expanded the range of manuscript types, while continuing to uphold expectations for content to reflect scholarly rigor. Authors may request that a manuscript is designated for publication as a *Clinical Forum* or a *Research Forum*, depending on whether the focus is on a clinical management issue (e.g., best practices for providing psychotherapy during stay-at-home orders) or a research topic (e.g., manuscripts focusing on "best COVID-19 research practices" that does not fit within criteria for "original research," "brief report," or "systematic review" formats). Authors should send a presubmission inquiry to the Editor-In-Chief (RSW) to determine suitability of their work for either of these manuscript types.
2. *Issue guidance for authors and reviewers on how to report and evaluate COVID-19-related changes to research protocols for studies impacted by COVID-19.* Upon consultation with the *IJED* editorial board, we will update author and reviewer guidelines to address this important concern. We expect to launch these updates by fall of 2020.
3. *Revise the "statistics reporting checklist that lists what, minimally, must be included in the data analysis section."* *IJED* provides detailed guidance about statistical reporting requirements as part of the author guidelines. We recognize, however, that this guidance section is unduly long and would benefit from streamlining. We will undertake a revision that, hopefully, will simplify and clarify instructions about *IJED* requirements for statistical reporting.
4. *Publish "topical" papers or guidance related to COVID-19.* Respondents suggested several specific topics (e.g., "Best practices for conducting virtual study visits and online data collection," "New intervention guidelines for conducting treatment during COVID-19 pandemic"). *IJED* welcomes COVID-19-related content, including original research and "best practices" papers. We continue to be

interested in *all high-quality research* that fits our scope, and we will take care that all submissions receive fair and comprehensive evaluations.

5. *Open access of IJED content.* Respondents requested more open-access content during the COVID-19 period. Wiley has agreed to make some COVID-19-related content available free of charge for a period of time. We also note that numerous European institutions have secured an agreement permitting authors affiliated with these institutions to publish primary research and review papers open access at no charge to the author. To determine eligibility, readers are directed to Wiley and Sons (2020).

4 | IN CLOSING

With this editorial, we shared our thoughts and planned actions in response to the input we received via our survey of researchers in the field. We remain committed to an open dialogue with the eating disorders research community, to responding flexibly to evolving needs or concerns, and to adjust course where indicated. This editorial has focused on research-related concerns. This focus shall not detract from paying attention to the disruptive impacts of COVID-19 on all activities in our field, including clinical work, teaching, and advocacy. We are pleased to have published a recent Clinical Forum that offers best practices examples shared by clinicians providing Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (Waller et al., in press), and we anticipate other publications that will be of interest to a broad readership.

We are humbled by and grateful for the passion and commitment of the eating disorders research community. Despite the strains and disruptions caused by COVID-19, many colleagues took the time to complete our survey and provide detailed suggestions. Indeed, in response to the survey, we also received private emails in which colleagues added personal anecdotes of their current lives, such as the challenges they faced maintaining clinical services or supporting their students at a time of great uncertainty and for some, personal health risk. We thank our respondents for sharing their perspectives, insights, and suggestions with us, and we wish all of them and our readers good health and a bright future.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

N/A

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