

# TURNING THE TIDES ON EATING DISORDER CARE FOR POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS



The transition to college or university is marked by a slew of changes— students may be living away from home for the first time, social networks and supports change, and academic pressures are increased. While exciting, this post-secondary period is also associated with an increase of disordered eating, with up to 40% of post-secondary students experiencing disordered eating, and up to 13% developing a diagnosable eating disorder.

College and university students are at particularly high-risk for eating disorders as the transition to post-secondary education often brings increased academic, social, and mental health demands. In addition, many students age out of adolescent eating disorder care programs, further compounding the issue.

Untreated, eating disorders can result in absenteeism and school dropouts, hospitalizations and prolonged illnesses, and even death. Currently, Canadian university health systems are not designed to identify and treat eating disorders in their student populations. With an estimated 12,000 students at Western experiencing disordered eating behaviours, a care model that meets the unique needs of post-secondary students is urgently needed.

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Western Institute for Neuroscience

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We're thrilled to support the PIERS team through NeuroConnect. This initiative exemplifies WIN's commitment to research that drives real-world impact for our community. By bringing together researchers, clinicians, and students to co-create solutions for eating disorder care, we're not just advancing science, we're directly improving the lives of London's post-secondary students through authentic partnerships that ensure research translates into meaningful change."

Dr. Shawn Whitehead- Director, Western Institute for Neuroscience

Recognizing this growing gap in services, the Eating Disorder Foundation of Canada established The Harbour in 2024, the first program of its kind. This eating disorder program focuses on post-secondary students and provides them with personalized interprofessional care, including access to psychiatrists, nurses, and nutritionists. PIERS (Post-secondary Intervention for Eating Disorders) is the latest interdisciplinary team awarded by WIN's NeuroConnect competition, will further develop and evaluate their innovative approach to eating disorder care. Through NeuroConnect, WIN will support the PIERS team with up to \$200,000 a year for two years and will provide dedicated staff support for team and grant development. Teams funded by NeuroConnect will be better positioned to respond to interdisciplinary funding calls, and with WIN's support, this research program will work to optimize the efficacy and effectiveness of The Harbour's new care model.

Students accessing the program will be invited to co-design improvements to the program, ensuring that the unique needs of post-secondary students will be incorporated into future program and care pathway designs. By intentionally partnering with Student Health representatives at both Western and Fanshawe and including students who have received care through The Harbour, the PIERS team can effectively engage with community knowledge users for greater impact through knowledge mobilization and implementation.



**Dr. Robbie Campbell**

Eating disorders are complex, multi-faceted and poorly understood, and we are in dire need of research initiatives ... designed to develop and assess the efficacy of new, personalized approaches, to provide more effective support."

Dr. Robbie Campbell, The Harbour



**Dr. Lindsay Bodell**

"Eating disorders have immeasurable impacts on young people and their supports, including hindering academic success. Unfortunately, eating disorders research has been historically underfunded, which has contributed to limit progress in treatment development."



**Dr. Cheryl Forchuk**

"In developing and testing innovative models of care (over decades) we generally find the models work- but they could work even better with some adjustments with input from both staff and clients. This participatory evaluation will ensure the program is well developed, with positive outcomes so it can spread to other educational institutions."

Ultimately, this initiative will result in optimal outcomes for students receiving eating disorder care. This novel care method is poised to become a model for other post secondary institutions across Canada, ensuring students receive the best care to thrive physically, mentally, and academically.

The PIERS team includes WIN researchers Lindsay Bodell and Cheryl Forchuk, David O'Gorman (Eating Disorders Foundation of Canada), and Robbie Campbell (The Harbour), as well as representatives from Western University and Fanshawe College student health teams, and people with lived eating disorder experience.