

# Abstract

This study offers a holistic view of subjective bodily experience, integrating the areas of body image, weight concerns and eating behaviour. A phenomenological enquiry involved in-depth individual interviews with nine female trainee and qualified psychotherapists in therapy. They explored their experience of living in their bodies, which they perceived to be overweight, what meaning this had for them, and the impact of this on their sense of self and their relationship to their environment.

It emerged that participants experienced intense preoccupation with poor body image, weight concerns and disordered eating behaviour, which impacted negatively on their quality of life. Perceptual distortions, and unfavourable comparisons of self with others, led to huge inner conflict, low self-esteem, and the creation of defensive behavioural adjustments. Emotional regulation was sought through eating, resulting in weight gain and intensified body image distress, perpetuating cycles of shame and self-denigration. Intermittent dieting led to long-term weight cycling. A protective element to body fat was revealed.

Relevant literature from diverse fields relating to obesity, binge eating and body image disorders was reviewed and compared with the findings. Implications and challenges for humanistic person-centred psychotherapy were discussed, and ideas for future research suggested.