

# Princeton Center for Eating Disorders *journeys*



## THE IMPOSSIBLE PURSUIT OF *Perfection*

Nothing in life is perfect, yet perfectionism – an unrealistic pursuit of virtually unattainable standards – still exists.

Stretching beyond the ideals of an over-achiever, a perfectionist creates a situation in which they can't ever meet their own expectations or standards. In some cases, this can lead to anxiety, depression, self-hatred, and even the loss of identity, according to Alison Locklear, LCSW, Senior Eating Disorders Therapist at Penn Medicine Princeton Center for Eating Disorders.

"Most perfectionists realize that they can't ever be perfect, but that doesn't stop them from trying," says Locklear. "It's really more about chasing a feeling than the pursuit of perfection. That feeling is different for each perfectionist – it can range from a sense of control or safety to feeling competent, loved, or respected."

When a perfectionist is introduced to unachievable body image or body culture ideals, it can be a recipe for the development of an eating disorder. Perfectionists may immediately try to meet these standards, and then continue to raise the bar.

"Perfectionism and an eating disorder play off of each other, because the eating disorder itself is a perfectionist," explains Locklear. "An eating disorder always raises the bar but never allows an individual to meet it, and it can emotionally bully anyone who doesn't attain its impossible standards."

IT'S REALLY MORE ABOUT  
*chasing a feeling*

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During treatment for eating disorders, patients sometimes exhibit treatment perfectionism. They may strive to be fully compliant during treatment, but then a mistake after discharge can lead to relapse, because most perfectionists can't tolerate mistakes.

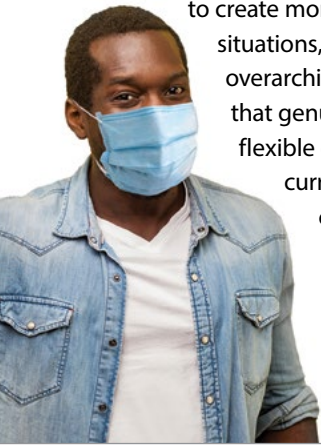
"Sometimes mistakes are the most important part of treatment," says Locklear. "A bad day or week doesn't define who someone is as a person, and patients need to do the hard work to challenge these beliefs. It's also important for providers to set a tone that celebrates vulnerability while managing their own emotional responses in order to truly meet patients where they are."

Because perfectionism is both common and detrimental in those with eating disorders, the Princeton Center for Eating Disorders team has developed several initiatives to specifically address it.

## RO-DBT Group

Based on the treatment philosophy and workbook developed by psychologist Thomas Lynch, PhD, Princeton Center for Eating Disorders has created a weekly psychoeducation group centering on radically open dialectical behavior therapy (RO-DBT). RO-DBT was initially created for overcontrolled styles of emotion and interpersonal expression (with traditional DBT created for undercontrolled styles).

RO-DBT is beneficial for those with perfectionist tendencies, as it aims to create more flexibility in thinking, greater openness to new situations, and an improved ability to express emotions. It's overarching goal is to create "a life worth sharing," recognizing that genuine social connection and the ability to be socially flexible can improve overall mental health. The group is currently available for adult patients, with an adolescent curriculum in development. It focuses heavily on mindfulness skills, practicing openness, and even incorporating therapeutic play that helps activate social safety – such as asking patients to say their names in a monotone voice, and then to do the same while raising their eyebrows and smiling.



## CHALLENGING PERFECTIONISM ART THERAPY Group

According to Allied Clinical Therapist Shea Andrews, art is an ideal way to challenge perfectionism, because it's about exploring where the process leads rather than seeking a perfect result. In the Challenging Perfectionism Art Therapy Group, Andrews incorporates process painting, inviting patients to choose colors they may not like without thinking about what they'll select next. To ease the need for control, she may recommend using a non-dominant hand, creating a piece of artwork as a group, splattering paint, or setting erasers aside. *(Patient artwork pictured above).*

"Both art and life can be messy, but that's part of the beauty," says Andrews. "We create an inviting, safe place to explore that."

"It's not a question of if mistakes will happen – it's when," says Locklear. "People who can embrace imperfection and practice self-compassion do better in recovery and can more effectively build a life worth living and sharing." ■

## CHALLENGING PERFECTIONISM Group

Available to child and adolescent patients, the weekly Challenging Perfectionism Group focuses heavily on CBT skills. Young patients explore the ways perfectionism interferes with life and learn to challenge thought distortions. In one exercise, patients write a letter to their treatment team describing what would happen if they weren't perfect in treatment – giving them the opportunity to consider and confront their fears.



# Eating Disorders Experts Confer on the Future of Treatment



Since Princeton Center for Eating Disorders began its work more than 25 years ago, much has changed in the eating disorders field.

Overall awareness of eating disorders has increased, as has the importance of recognizing diversity, factoring in the social determinants of health, and providing gender-affirming care. Technology has evolved, and with it the knowledge of how this has helped and hurt those with eating disorders. Research is expanding, with a greater significance being placed on collaboration and strategies that focus on improved quality of life, such as harm reduction principles.

With decades of experience to leverage and build on, the Princeton Center for Eating Disorders team facilitates change around advances such as these through both internal and external connections – often stepping outside of its formal network to incorporate the insights of community-based experts into treatment approaches.

“Establishing partnerships helps to inform and align the care we provide,” says Robbi Alexander, PhD, APN, PMHCNS-BC, Director of Princeton Center for Eating Disorders. “We not only serve as a resource and safety net for our community, but we also benefit from learning from community thought leaders and patients. We’re now conducting interesting research that incorporates real-world insights and lived experience.”

## Meeting of the Minds

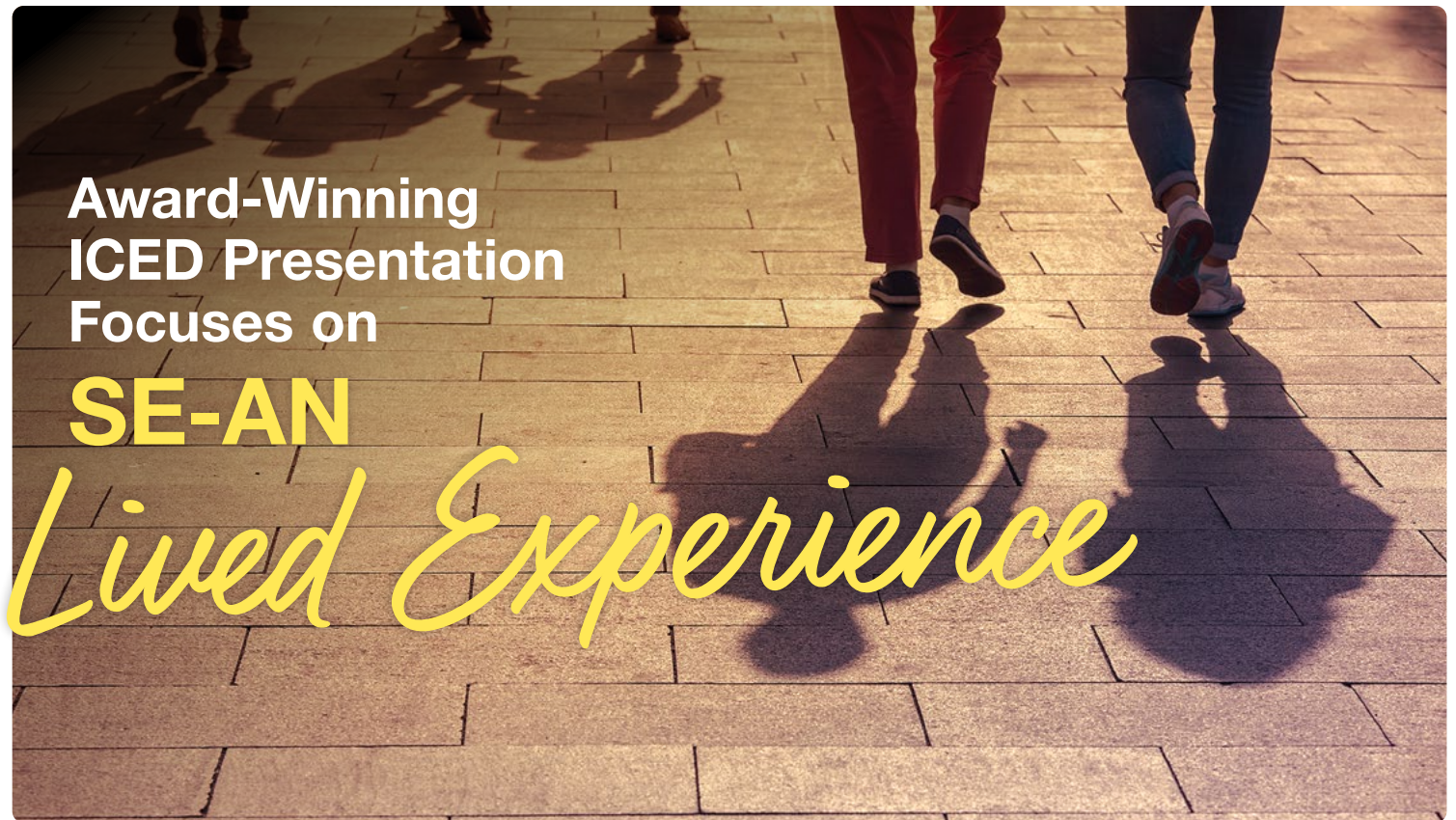
The evolution of care was discussed at a recent Princeton Center for Eating Disorders mini-retreat, with multidisciplinary team members joined by former Director Melinda Parisi Cummings, PhD, Assistant Professor in the Graduate Programs in Counseling Psychology at Holy Family University, and Jill Shaffer, RD, CEDRD-S, renowned eating disorders dietitian in private practice, both of whom serve as consultants for Princeton Center for Eating Disorders.

The team examined strategies that lend themselves to greater engagement in treatment, including:

- Meeting patients where they are
- Continuing to harness the power of virtual technology to expand care access
- Collaborating with physicians, other care providers, and community stakeholders
- Fostering collaborative, relationship-based care
- Focusing on improved quality of life

“We’ve always collaborated with patients to a certain degree, but truly placing them at the center of care and meeting them where they are is critical in today’s environment,” says Shaffer. “The more creative we can be in making treatment more convenient and working together at all levels of care, the better.” ■

Stay tuned for additional research updates, focus group opportunities, and continuing education webinars and conferences.



## Award-Winning ICED Presentation Focuses on SE-AN

# Lived Experience

Over the past few years, the Princeton Center for Eating Disorders team has been exploring the existing research and therapeutic philosophy for patients with severe and enduring anorexia nervosa (SE-AN), with an evidence-based protocol in development to examine how treatment approaches might better meet the needs of patients. The protocol espouses a harm reduction model, with an emphasis on ensuring safety, avoiding further negative consequences of illness, and improving quality of life – and less focus on specific numerical targets.

In June, Rebecca Boswell, PhD, Supervising Psychologist at Princeton Center for Eating Disorders, presented and discussed recent research findings with a global audience at the International Conference on Eating Disorders (ICED). The presentation – “Exploring the Lived Experience of Severe and Enduring Anorexia Nervosa” – focused on the results of semi-structured interviews with 17 patients with SE-AN. It received a Top Abstract Award from the Academy for Eating Disorders.

“We can theorize based on the limited literature available, but we recognize that the best understanding may come from asking patients directly about their own lived experience with SE-AN,” says Dr. Boswell. “Our patients were enthusiastic about participating and generous in sharing their time and feedback.”

During the interviews, patients clearly articulated their perceptions of the causes, negative consequences, and functions of their eating disorder. Precipitating factors identified included trauma,

perfectionism, participation in sports, major life events, and biological vulnerability. Negative consequences were related to physical, social, and mental impacts of the eating disorder, while perceived benefits included emotional avoidance and a sense of safety, control, or accomplishment.

Most patients reported prior treatment at multiple levels of care, and shared that the most positive treatment experiences included:

- › Patient/provider alignment of treatment goals
- › Strong interpersonal relationships
- › Support and respect from the treatment team
- › Slower pace

While most patients with SE-AN did not report hope for full recovery, **every patient reported a desire for an improved quality of life**, which often was a motivating factor for admission.

With results suggesting that patients have treatment goals consistent with harm reduction and quality of life improvement, continued research at Princeton Center for Eating Disorders is examining whether adopting a chronic-illness, acceptance-based treatment approach can be beneficial for patients with SE-AN.

“Ultimately as providers, we try to help patients build a life that they are able to maintain, with medical safety at the forefront,” adds Dr. Boswell. “It’s becoming even more clear that for many patients, we may want to forge a more individualized path forward.” ■

# TEAM MEMBERS EARN HIGH HONORS

Nursing excellence continues to shine at Princeton Center for Eating Disorders, with three team members receiving the following honors.

## The DAISY Award®



Through nominations from patients, two nurses were selected to receive The DAISY Award® for Extraordinary Nurses, which recognizes nurses throughout the world whose compassion, guidance, and level of care exemplify the high standards of the profession.



**Lisa Sabo, BSN, RN, PMHN-BC** was nominated for her compassion, knowledge, team approach, and positive attitude. The nominator noted, "Lisa is a leader in all of these components and to her nursing team...we are lucky to have her caring for us."



**Marissa Harris, RN, BSN, PMHN-BC** received two DAISY Awards. The first nomination described her as providing top-notch care, support, and compassion, and as having a lasting impact that changed this patient's outlook on life. Her second nomination noted that she is genuine, looks out for each patient's best interests, and operates with ease while giving everyone the kindness and attention they deserve.

## Princeton Health Award



**Kristina Ullrich, MHA**, who is currently pursuing her nursing degree, received a Penn Medicine Princeton Health BE Standards Award, recognized for fulfilling the quality BE Compassionate – "I Serve with my Head and Heart." Her nomination from Nurse Manager Lauren Firman, RN, CNML described Ullrich as a bright light, a role model to patients and staff members, and someone who extends her compassion and dedication to all those around her. Always ready to lend a hand, Ullrich readily shares her knowledge and assists the nursing team in countless ways.

## Nurses to Present at Transcultural Nursing Society



Assistant Nurse Manager **Corinne Timberman, RN, BSN, PMHN-BC** (pictured far left) and **Amber Molineaux, RN, BSN, PMHN-BC** will present their research at

the 48th Annual Conference of The Transcultural Nursing Society, where their abstract "A Lesson in Cultural Humility: Examining Best Practices of Inclusive Care for Gender-Diverse Patients," was accepted as a podium presentation. The conference will be held November 2-5 in Louisville, KY, with the nurses' travel made possible through funding from Princeton Medical Center Foundation. For details about the conference, visit [tcns.org](http://tcns.org).

## Dr. Boswell to Lead Greater Philadelphia IAEDP Chapter



**Rebecca Boswell, PhD**, Supervising Psychologist at Penn Medicine Princeton Center for Eating Disorders, has been named President of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter of the International Association of Eating Disorders Professionals (IAEDP). In this role, she will lead a multidisciplinary board of eating disorder professionals in coordinating high-quality educational and training events both locally and nationally. For details on upcoming events, visit [facebook.com/IAEDPgp](https://facebook.com/IAEDPgp).

### DON'T FORGET!

## Free Gender-Affirming Care Series

This virtual series features CME/CEU credits for physicians, nurses, counselors, and social workers, with sessions on October 4, October 12, and October 19 at 12:30 p.m. Topics include inclusive care, considering gender and identity in eating disorders treatment, and perspectives from a trans woman/patient advocate on providing gender-affirming care. Register at [princetonhouse.org/education](http://princetonhouse.org/education).





**Penn Medicine**  
Princeton Medical Center

Princeton Center for Eating Disorders  
1 Plainsboro Road, Plainsboro, NJ 08536

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# Learning About “BODY STUFF”

Understanding how the body functions and the way it responds to the negative effects of an eating disorder can be eye-opening, particularly for children and adolescents. In a recent psychoeducation series that focused on these concepts, young patients at Princeton Center for Eating Disorders learned how to better trust their bodies.

“These sessions were an opportunity to discuss the various systems of the body, the role of nutrients, and how the body works to take care of itself rather than needing to be controlled,” explains Robbi Alexander, PhD, APN, PMHCNS-BC, Director of Princeton Center for Eating Disorders, who facilitated the series. “Patients wrote down everything they knew about their bodies, and we then separated myths from reality.”

The series concluded with a “Body Stuff” activity, with Dr. Alexander sewing fabric into not-so-perfect doll shapes that patients could stuff and decorate. Inside their doll, each patient placed a red glitter heart that featured a message they wrote to themselves. While working on the art, they continued to discuss their bodies and their health – including the fact that most medical complications of eating disorders can be reversed with adequate nutrition.



## Donor Support Facilitates Projects



The “Body Stuff” activity is one of many initiatives funded through philanthropic support from the community. This ongoing support has included a fundraising campaign coordinated by former patient Eliza Cekirge,\* age 13, who wanted to give back to a program that helped shape who she is today.

“Our community has always been a true partner in making projects like these possible,” says Hyona Revere, Senior Vice President of Development for Princeton Medical Center Foundation. “It’s incredibly meaningful for our staff, physicians, and patients to know that the community entrusts us with their care and supports the work that’s happening here.”

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\*cited with patient/parental permission