



Center for the
Advancement of
Research on Eating
Behaviors

Progress Report

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A Year's Overview



Dr. Kelsie Forbush

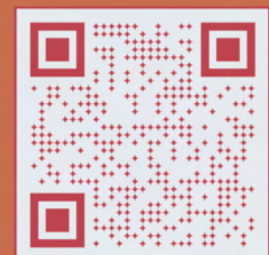
Director of the Center for the Advancement of Research on Eating Behaviors (CARE)

I'm delighted to report that CARE has had a productive year. One of the most exciting developments was that **our research laboratory became an officially recognized center within the Life Span Institute at the University of Kansas.** The Life Span Institute began in the 1960s to improve the understanding of youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities who resided in institutionalized settings. Since that time, the focus of the institute has expanded to include 10 research centers that explore diverse topics including prenatal and postnatal nutrition, addiction, fostering healthy communities, and more. We couldn't be more delighted to expand our scope and reach!

Other exciting developments have included the successful completion of several new treatment studies, including our BEST-U clinical research trial—in which we treated over 130 University of Kansas students who had an eating disorder—as well as a single-session treatment of 75 college students with binge eating problems. We also finished an exciting qualitative study of Black, African American, and Afro-Caribbean individuals who were pregnant or recently gave birth to understand issues that impact their body image, eating, and mental health. As outlined in this newsletter, **we have innovative new research that will fund an expansion of the BEST-U program, as well as new staff, ongoing studies, and outreach to help those with eating disorders.** Thank you for taking the time to read our newsletter and support the important work that we are doing.



If you are interested in donating to help improve treatments for people with eating disorders, or to support graduate student work, please scan the QR code below or visit <https://care.ku.edu/support-our-mission>



We are grateful for your continued support!

Why We CARE



Above: The CARE team in Fall 2024.

Why study eating disorders?

Eating disorders (EDs) have **the second highest mortality rate** of any mental illness, yet treatments are effective for only 40-60% of clients who seek treatment.

There is a dire clinical need for research to identify the underlying causes of eating disorders, ensuring that they can be accurately identified by healthcare providers and that patients receive swift and effective interventions. Without research to evaluate the effective assessment and treatment of eating disorders, people with eating disorders will continue to "slip through the cracks" in the healthcare system and not live the productive, high-quality lives that they deserve.

CARE's mission

The Center for the Advancement of Research on Eating Behaviors, or CARE, is a diverse and dedicated team committed to advancing knowledge in the field of eating disorders. Based at the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence, KS, we conduct innovative and transformative research to better identify persons with disordered eating issues for early screening, intervention, and treatment progress monitoring.

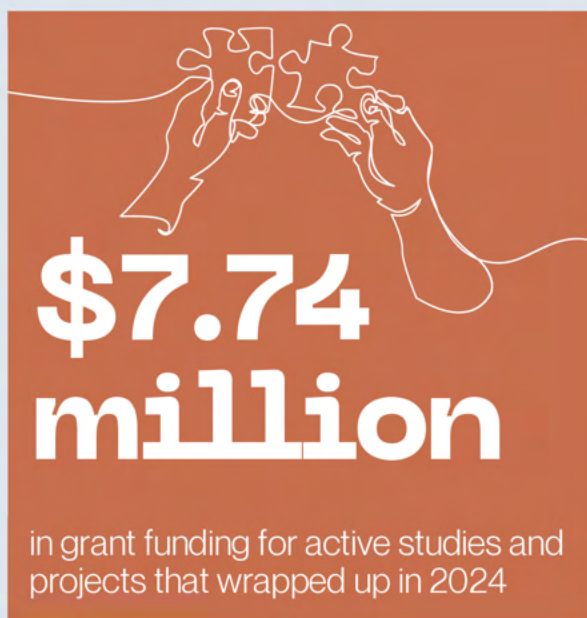
To further our goals, we maintain a sub-initiative housed within CARE called COPE, or the Center for Overcoming Problem Eating. Our COPE team is composed of skilled clinical psychologists, graduate researchers, and undergraduate research assistants dedicated to issuing treatment that is efficient, engaging, convenient, and efficacious.

Ultimately, **our mission is to improve the way eating disorders are assessed, diagnosed, and treated** while providing our study participants with a supportive and sensitive research experience.

Our Impact This Year



The CARE team has experienced a productive year, from presenting our findings at scientific research conferences, to working with participants all across the country, to teaching the next generation of eating disorder researchers. We started this year as a lab on KU's campus, but recently, KU recognized the quality of our work and granted us research center designation within the university's Life Span Institute. With two full-time faculty, three lab coordinators, five graduate students, and the 20 undergraduate research assistants who have committed time to the center in 2024, it's no wonder we've been able to make leaps and bounds with our research! Here are a few numbers showing the strength of CARE output in the last year.



Above: CARE researchers at the 2024 annual Eating Disorder Research Society meeting in Sitges, Spain

Be Your BEST-U



This COPE study is filling gaps in eating disorder treatment access for college students

4,000 ↗

College students screened for eating disorders to date through BEST-U

Since 2019, the **B**uilding **H**ealthy **E**ating & **S**elf-Esteem **T**ogether for **U**niversity Students (BEST-U) study has enabled our team to screen KU's student population for disordered eating or body image issues. As part of the study, we offer students who may be facing these challenges access to local and national mental health, food assistance, and community support resources. To date, the BEST-U study has screened over 4,000 students for eating disorders.

Additionally, the BEST-U study has offered eligible KU students an evidence-based treatment, incorporating a mobile phone app developed by our team and 25-minute weekly coaching sessions conducted by our clinical team members.

BEST-U sought to evaluate whether our intervention had a lasting impact on students. Thus far, we have observed impressive results and advancements from our participants at six-month follow-ups.

We have now completed our current BEST-U study (BEST-U 2.0), and we are very enthusiastic about the future direction of additional BEST-U studies!



Above: KU students enjoying ice cream at Sylas and Maddy's in downtown Lawrence, KS.



Above: CARE Director Dr. Kelsie Forbush (left) performing a mock interview to prepare for BEST-U.

Beginning in 2025, with funding from the National Institute for Mental Health, our team will commence the next phase of the study, **BEST-U 3.0**, to further close the gap in treatment accessibility for students. As part of our expanded efforts, we are now collaborating with Watkins Student Health Center at KU to train non-specialized medical providers in delivering the BEST-U treatment. We aim to continue providing KU students with high-quality, evidence-based treatment options for eating and body-image concerns while also exploring the feasibility of training medical providers to deliver this intervention. **We are optimistic that what we learn during this newest phase of BEST-U will equip us to expand the program across various college campuses nationwide.**

Addressing Adolescent Needs

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Smart Technology for Anorexia Nervosa Recovery (STAR)

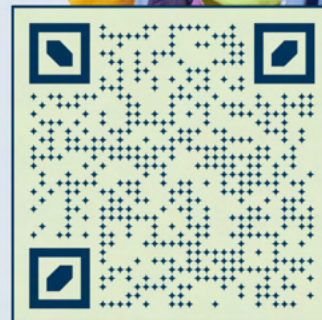
The STAR App is a COPE study that supports youth who have recently received intensive treatment for anorexia nervosa and related disorders with the goal of preventing relapse. It reinforces important skills to help youth manage painful emotions, cope with stressors, and improve body image.



Over the past year, we have begun recruiting participants to test the acceptability, feasibility, and effectiveness of our app. So far, 24 participants have enrolled in the study, and 21 have completed the app. Recruitment for this study is ongoing through June 2025. We are excited to continue supporting youth in recovery through our app! **If you or your child is interested in participating, reach out to us star@ku.edu or scan the QR code for more information.**

The Eating Pathology Symptoms Inventory for Children & Teens (EPSI ChAT)

The Eating Pathology Symptoms Inventory (EPSI) is a self-report questionnaire created by Dr. Kelsie Forbush in 2013 to assess eating, weight, and shape concerns. Although our recent research suggests that the EPSI is valid in teenagers (Richson et al., 2021), we are working on developing an extended version for use in children. Right now, we are actively recruiting children and teens between the ages of 10 and 18 years old for this study! If you are a parent and are interested in having your child participate or would like more information, **you may contact us at eatstudy@ku.edu. You can also scan this QR code** to take our brief eligibility screening survey.



Working with Military and Veterans



We are creating a BASEline assessment tool for eating disorder diagnosis in veteran and active servicemember populations

CARE recently wrapped up all data collection for a major study funded by the Department of Defense (DoD) focused on better identifying U.S. veterans who may benefit from eating disorder and general mental health care. Military servicemembers and veterans are more likely to develop eating disorders, but until recently, healthcare screeners had not been developed with this unique population in mind. In 2018, the DoD awarded CARE a grant to create and test a brief eating disorder screener in U.S. veterans. The first phase of this study resulted in the creation of the Brief Assessment of Stress and Eating (BASE). **When tested in a non-veteran population, the BASE was able to better identify cisgender men with eating disorders than existing screeners.**



Phase two, which was completed in February 2024, tested the BASE in a separate sample of U.S. veterans. Data analysis is ongoing, but the information we collected has been used to look deeper into the connections between eating behaviors, suicidality, substance use, and gender in veterans.



See the next page to learn about graduate student Will Morgan's work with the Veteran Study data!

\$4.23 
million

in funding awarded to CARE from the DoD in 2023 for our newest large-scale study

Active military servicemembers similarly face unique eating disorder risk factors and treatment barriers, which led CARE to launch a large-scale study testing the BASE in individuals who have recently entered the military. This project will span three years, allowing the team to understand connections between eating behaviors, risk factors, and need-for-treatment over time. Recruitment efforts for this study launched in the summer of 2024 and remain ongoing.

Graduate Student Research



Read more grad student research on our website at care.ku.edu/people

Sarah Johnson-Munguia's BELLA Study



Body functionality interventions, which emphasize the body's abilities rather than appearance, have shown promise for improving positive body image and reducing body dissatisfaction. The Body Image Education for Las Latinas App (BELLA), developed by Sarah, was **the first mobile app culturally adapted and designed for Latine women to encourage a positive body image** by emphasizing body functionality. Results showed BELLA increased body appreciation, functionality appreciation, self-esteem, and body satisfaction, as well as reduced self-objectification and restrictive eating. These findings suggest that BELLA is a promising intervention for enhancing positive body image and reducing disordered eating among Latine women.

Will Morgan's Veteran Research



This year, Will presented research on the associations between different eating disorder symptoms and core military-relevant traumatic experiences among veterans. **He found that military sexual trauma (MST) was positively associated with more purging, restricting, and binge eating in women.** These findings could suggest that different traumatic experiences carry differential eating disorder symptom risk when comparing across binary gender. Will plans to consolidate these findings and prepare a formal MA thesis manuscript for internal program defense and later publication within the larger scientific community.

Sonakshi Negi's HOPE Study



Many students with eating problems cannot access care due to high treatment costs and lack of specialized treatment providers. Funded by the American Psychological Association Junior Scientist Fellowship as a part of her master's thesis project, Sonakshi developed and tested *Help for Overcoming Problem Eating* (HOPE). **HOPE is a digital single-session intervention for binge eating problems in college students.** Excitingly, results from this project showed that HOPE users really enjoyed the program and thought it would benefit other students with binge eating problems. **After using HOPE, users also had lower binge eating** at one-week and four-week follow-ups. Sonakshi recently defended her thesis and passed with honors. Over the next few years, Sonakshi plans to keep testing the effectiveness of HOPE.

Mari Thomeczek's Perinatal Study



Myths about who eating disorders affect prevent eating disorder detection among pregnant and postpartum individuals, especially Black birthing individuals. Mari is developing a racially inclusive eating disorder screening tool for pregnant and postpartum individuals centered on findings from qualitative interviews conducted with Black, African American, and Afro-Caribbean individuals about eating and body image during pregnancy and postpartum. Through collaboration with Uzazi Village, an organization in Kansas City that promotes birthing health equity, as well as financial support from Postpartum Support International and the KU Racial Equity Fund, **Mari aims to make the screening tool widely available for use within obstetric and other healthcare settings across the U.S.**

New Research Frontiers

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As our team expands, so do our research interests
—we're branching out!

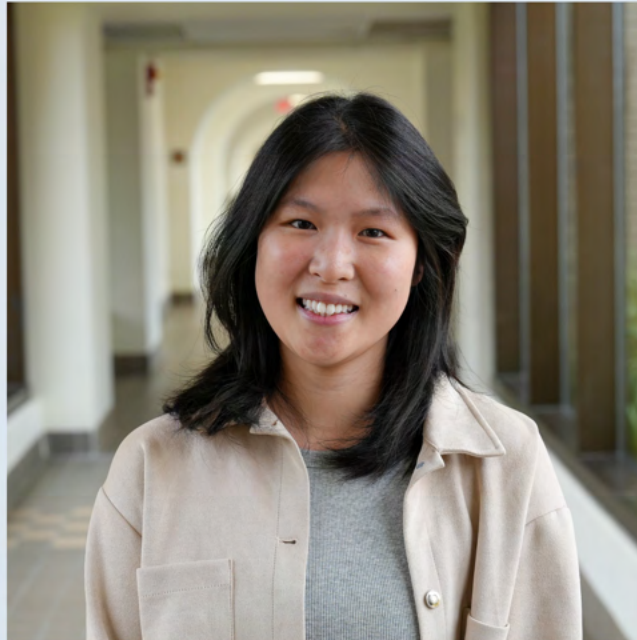


Above: Dr. Angeline Bottera, CARE Associate Director since summer 2023.

Eat, Sleep, Repeat

"I attended and presented research from our DoD-funded veteran's study at the Society of Behavioral Sleep Medicine conference in September 2024. These findings, which are being submitted for publication, support a **relationship between insomnia and binge eating and restricting symptoms among veterans** recently separated from service. Further, we identified insomnia as a particularly potent risk factor for eating disorder symptoms among individuals with lower levels of body dissatisfaction. Overall, our findings implicate sleep disturbances as a potentially fruitful intervention target, supporting integrated approaches for sleep and eating in veterans."

— Dr. Angeline Bottera



Above: Elizabeth Li, first year graduate student in the Clinical Child Psychology program and newest CARE team member.

Kicking Off with CARE

"My first few months with CARE have been a great learning experience. As a first-year grad student, I have felt supported and welcomed while connecting with others. Within the center, I am excited to study **eating disorders in racially diverse and underrepresented groups**, as well as explore the relationship between **social media content and eating disorders!**"

— Elizabeth Li

Cutting-Edge Coordinators



Lab coordinators Emily Like and Anjali Sharma attended the 2024 Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) convention to share posters with results from their personal research projects. Likewise, lab coordinator Samiya Rasheed gave a presentation on exciting new results from a CARE study at the Kansas Psychological Association's (KPA) 2024 Fall Conference.



Coordinator Emily Like

Emily presented two posters at ABCT this year. In her personal research, Emily has explored how clinical impairment is a key criterion in diagnosing eating disorders, which occur across the weight spectrum. It is important that the tools we use to measure impairment function the same across weight categories. She presented on her project examining if the Clinical Impairment Assessment (CIA), a tool used to measure clinical impairment, performed consistently across weight categories. Emily found that the CIA is partly consistent but also seems to measure other constructs, like weight stigma or internalized weight bias (IWB), for people in higher-weight bodies.

The results of this project led Emily to conduct a second study, examining which body-related terms college students in higher-weight bodies prefer and how preferences vary based on IWB levels. Her findings, also presented at ABCT showed that people with low IWB favored "neutral" terms, while those with high IWB identified more with "undesirable" terms, emphasizing the need to look at terminology on a more individual level. **Emily hopes this research will guide recommendations for using body-related language that reduces weight stigma and encourages inclusivity.**



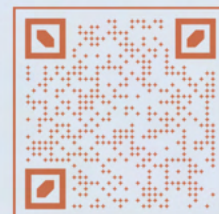
Coordinator Anjali Sharma

Anjali's ABCT poster shared her research exploring how the DSM-5-TR diagnostic criteria for eating disorders perform across gender. To get her results, she investigated responses to a common self-report measure, the Eating Disorder Diagnostic Scale, which uses language from the DSM-5. **She found evidence for bias across multiple symptoms, meaning that the criteria likely does not equitably assess eating disorders across gender.** ABCT 2024 was Anjali's first academic conference, and gave her the opportunity to connect with other researchers who focus more broadly on LGBTQ+ mental health.



Coordinator Samiya Rasheed

Experiencing weight discrimination in day-to-day and medical settings increases one's risk of eating disorder development but lowers treatment engagement. This year, Samiya presented on the connections between weight discrimination, eating disorder impairment, and treatment interest in college students. **Results showed that impairment increases with experiences of weight discrimination, but interest in a virtual guided treatment also increased.** Virtual formats may be more acceptable due to fewer opportunities for weight discrimination. The KPA conference, equally geared towards clinicians and researchers, allowed CARE to advocate against weight discrimination directly to the community. This project, originally led by CARE graduate student Mari Thomeczek, has been published. Scan the QR code to read the full article.



The Future of the Field

20 undergraduate research assistants devoted time to CARE studies this year alone.

If you have participated in one of our studies, chances are you've received emails, phone calls, texts, or even mail from us. More often than not, the folks behind those communications are our undergraduate research assistants, or RAs. One of our leading aims as a research center is to foster the next generation of bright thinkers and equip them with tools to thrive in their professional lives.

We want our students to not only be cutting-edge researchers who work well with data, but to be compassionate treatment providers who know how to work well with people of all backgrounds.

In addition to working with data and contributing to the daily functioning of our major studies, CARE RAs have had multiple opportunities for professional growth. This year, they have:

- Undergone qualitative interview training to perform interviews with study participants
- Worked with graduate students to present research at community forums
- Completed science communication projects, including social media posts, website pages, posters, and more to share center findings with a general audience
- Tabled at university events to discuss CARE research with the KU population



Above: CARE RAs join the lab coordinators in tabling at KU's 2024 annual Student Wellness Fair to discuss eating disorders and treatment options with their peers.

Lab Values



RAs are trained on essential lab values that emphasize team science skills and research ethics

Sharing Back



RAs learn how to communicate major study findings to non-academic populations as part of CARE's focus on open research

Mentorship



RAs have access to lab coordinators and Center directors who provide constructive feedback while encouraging growth each week

Looking Ahead

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Below: Aerial shot of the University of Kansas's campus, where CARE is headquartered.



CARE's bold vision is a world free from eating disorders. We are laying the groundwork for this world here at the University of Kansas as our highly skilled team makes innovative advances in the prevention and treatment of eating disorders. As we look forward and set goals for the coming year, here are just a few areas where we are excited to continue to grow!

Increasing Access with Digital Health

Digital mental health, or mHealth, represents a new frontier for improving patient experience, especially in areas with low access to health care. Studies like BEST-U and STAR, as well as graduate student projects like HOPE, are currently utilizing mHealth to reach participants who might otherwise struggle in a more "traditional" health setting. We anticipate that our new partnership with ExpiWell, a premier digital experience sampling method, will allow us to create an even smoother and more effective digital experience for our study participants.

Reaching Community Clinicians

With the newest iteration of the BEST-U 3.0 study and our partnership with Watkins Health Services on KU's campus, we are expanding the scope of our intervention materials. However, we do not want this to end with BEST-U! It is our goal to reach more community clinicians and equip them to provide interventions from multiple studies such as STAR and EPSI ChAT that our Center has developed and rigorously tested. Further, our team is partnering with KU's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) and federally qualified health centers in Kansas on new research aimed at developing and refining mHealth treatments for individuals with disordered eating and

sleep problems. These treatments will be built for and with non-specialty providers to increase access and reach of evidence-based care in the community.

Dispelling Myths for Better Treatment

Myths about whom eating disorders affect are highly prevalent in our society. People of all genders, races, and backgrounds are at risk of developing an eating disorder, but current assessment measures are not well-calibrated to detect and treat all individuals. We seek to expand what populations benefit from eating disorder assessment and research. Initiatives like the military study have improved assessment among cisgender men, while graduate student Sarah's BELLA app is the first app culturally designed to address Latine women's body image concerns. This work remains a forefront priority for our research team.

Assessing Eating Disorder Outcomes

There is a need in our communities for better tools aimed at assessing eating disorder outcomes. We included an automated assessment component as part of our STAR study that we aim to scale up with an upcoming qualitative project. As part of this initiative, we will work with community providers to understand what assessment tools for routine outcomes monitoring is most desirable and effective.

We hope you will follow along with our work as we continue to scale up our studies and introduce more research initiatives. We are thrilled to keep sharing our progress with you!

Contact Us

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CARE has two locations within the University of Kansas's network of facilities. Our on-campus location at the Dole Human Development Center serves as the center of operations for our studies focused on the **diagnosis and assessment** of eating disorders, such as our veterans and military studies. Our off-campus location at the Wakarusa Research Facility houses our **COPE initiatives focused on the treatment** of eating disorders, including STAR and BEST-U. Feel free to reach out to either branch of CARE, and we will be sure to direct you to the resources that you're looking for!



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