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## Why perfectionists are more prone to binge eating

By Brian Bergman

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By definition, perfectionists set very high standards for themselves. As a result, they are also setting themselves up to fail. And when they do, research is now showing that many perfectionists resort to binge eating to alleviate feelings of loneliness, sadness and inadequacy.

"Perfectionists often reach the conclusion that other people are disappointed with them or disapproving," says Simon Sherry, an assistant professor of psychology and the director of the Personality Research Team at Dalhousie University, in Halifax. "Binge eating provides a temporary escape from these unpleasant thoughts, though ultimately, it's a very destructive pattern. In effect, binge eating is a short-term solution that becomes a long-term problem."

In an initial study, Sherry and Peter Hall, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo, tracked the daily activities of 566 female university undergraduates. They had two reasons for choosing that particular target group. First, binge eating is most common among 18- to 25-year-olds. Second, women are more likely to binge eat than men.

Previous studies focused on the link between perfectionism and anorexia and bulimia. Sherry and Hall wanted to confirm whether there was a similarly strong link to binge eating. They found that study subjects who exhibited perfectionist personality traits were more likely to experience many of the triggers associated with binge eating, including friction in their relationships, low self-esteem and symptoms of depression. They also

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discovered that binge eating was more common among those who were consciously trying to diet.

"Imagine a highly perfectionist person who, by the end of the day, has been harshly restricting her eating, has experienced a lot of negative emotions and has encountered a lot of social friction because of her inflexibility and unrealistic expectations," says Sherry. "For her, smelling, chewing and digesting a large amount of food rapidly takes the mind away from these higher-order perceptions. But it's ultimately self-defeating, because after binge eating, she has these negative feelings all over again."

Sherry and Hall's initial study was published in 2009 in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. Sherry says a subsequent study, now under peer review, has confirmed that perfectionists prefer binge eating to binge drinking as a release valve. It's too early to say why that might be, but Sherry speculates one reason could be that alcohol-induced hangovers have an impact on performance — something perfectionists care deeply about. As well, one of Sherry's graduate students is starting to study families to see whether there might be other external, environmental factors driving perfectionists toward binge eating.

This kind of research aims to improve assessment and treatment for perfectionists who binge — a task that can be difficult because perfectionists often resist treatment, since they don't want to admit any imperfections. Sherry wants to break down that barrier. "I'm hopeful young people will read about this research and realize there are effective interventions," he says. "Change is possible."