

Dal News

Eating your feelings: The mother-daughter relationship and binge eating

Nikki Comeau - March 6, 2013



New research study offers some provocative food for thought. (Danny Abriel photo)

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It's late at night — almost too late — but you can't go to sleep yet. You don't want to. You've only accomplished half of what you set out to do, and after a day like today, you really just need to finish this *one thing*: maybe it's completing a paper, planning a budget, or cleaning the house.

But for many university undergrads, eating is what gets done first.

In her [recently published study in *Eating Behaviors*](#), Dalhousie PhD student Aislin Mushquash investigates binge eating in women during their undergrad years.

“Across the lifespan, the rates of binge eating are highest for people who are 18-25,” explains Mushquash. “Especially the ones who are in university facing increased stress, fluctuating moods and problems with interpersonal relationships.”

But in contrast to prior research on binge eating, which has primarily explored an individual's personality traits and emotional state of mind, Mushquash looked at how interpersonal relationships might influence a tendency to binge eat.

“We know that problems in social relationships — a fight with a friend, a fight with a parent — can be a trigger for the individual who binge eats,” says Mushquash. “So problems in interpersonal relationships can directly and

indirectly affect someone's mood and someone's tendency to try to improve that mood... and they end up binge eating as a result, to sort of manage the best way they can in that moment.”

Perfectionism, perceptions and parenting

The relationship that Mushquash and her supervisor [Dr. Simon Sherry](#) (associate professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience) examined was between mothers and daughters, with just over 200 mother-daughter pairs participating in the study.

The research was conducted using a model that suggests perfectionism and difficulties in the mother-daughter relationship can lead to poor eating behaviours for daughters. In other words: those who perceive the need to be perfect, and those who are pressured to achieve excessively high standards may end up using food as a coping mechanism.

Mushquash and Dr. Sherry assessed socially prescribed perfectionism in daughters (those that think others expect them to be perfect) and psychological control in mothers (those who are controlling and place pressure on their children).

The findings paint a picture of young women who are inclined to feel like others expect too much of them, paired with mothers who tend to display controlling, demanding behaviour. The young women often feel they can't meet their mothers' expectations and that they're letting their mothers down, leading to feelings of sadness. Binging, then, becomes a short-term coping mechanism for the young women during times of unhappiness.

“Maybe a mom really wants the best for her child but just doesn't know how to get that across,” says Mushquash. “Maybe it comes across too excessive, and then you have a daughter who feels like she's stuck because she's never going to meet these expectations to be a perfect daughter or a perfect student.”

New insights to help address binge eating

Mushquash and Dr. Sherry are quick to clarify that the research doesn't intend to point fingers of blame at moms. Rather, it's new insight that helps students, families, and counsellors have a better understanding of the kinds of external factors that can lead to poor eating behaviours.

“I think our research is an important reminder that context counts,” explains Dr. Sherry. He says their research looks at both the individual context and the interpersonal context, suggesting that for too long, one has been studied without the other. “If anything, I think the pendulum of opinion had swung too far in the direction of blaming the individual binge eater.”

Dr. Sherry considers Mushquash an “absolute star,” noting that she's already been published numerous times.

“There are literally hundreds of articles on perfectionism and disordered eating and she found an important gap in knowledge and decided to fill it,” says Dr. Sherry.

Dr. Sherry is also a practicing psychologist in Halifax and notes that this research has a lot of clinical relevance that could have implications for assessment and treatment.

“You want to do research that has an impact, not only within academia, but also outside of academia. This is the sort of research that will inform the work of academics and also have a clear impact on the practice side of things,” says Dr. Sherry. “I think it can actually challenge the existing understanding we have of perfectionism and binge eating — it can expand it in an important way.”

Link: [Simon Sherry's Personality Research Team lab](#)

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