

## Women with controlling moms more likely to be binge eaters, study finds

**JANE TABER**

HALIFAX — The Globe and Mail

Published Tuesday, Mar. 05 2013, 6:02 PM EST

Last updated Tuesday, Mar. 05 2013, 6:13 PM EST

Perfectionist daughters with controlling mothers are more likely to be binge eaters, using the dysfunctional behaviour as a way of coping with the stress, according to new research from Dalhousie University.

The research is unique, as its focus is not just on the individual but also on her interpersonal relationships, Aislin Mushquash, a PhD student in Dalhousie's psychology department, and Dr. Simon Sherry, associate professor of psychology at the university, say of their study, which was published in the journal *Eating Behaviors*.

The study found that daughters who reported having controlling mothers had a predisposition to believing they had to be perfect. "So in the lives of perfectionistic young women who have acrimonious relationships with their mothers, binge eating may serve an important function – a function of soothing, a function of relieving, a function of escaping," Sherry says.

The Dalhousie psychologists studied 218 pairs of mothers and daughters, the majority of whom were from Halifax. About 70 per cent of the women, all undergraduate students at Dalhousie, lived at home with their mothers; 30 per cent lived in the community.

Binge eating is defined as eating a large amount of food within a short time period, such as two hours. "It can be a bag of chips, a package of cookies, two cartons of ice cream, then they go and get a hamburger," Mushquash says. "It really is a loss of control."

The daughters filled out questionnaires that asked them how much they agreed with a series of statements on a scale of 1 to 7. For example, "My mother expects nothing less than perfection from me." Or, "I stuffed myself with food."

The mothers were asked to rate how true certain behaviours were on a three-point scale: "I am always trying to change how my daughter feels about things," was one question.

However, Dr. Blake Woodside, a psychiatrist and director of Toronto General Hospital's eating disorder program, does not believe that the link is that simple or clear.

"Is the strain [the acrimony between mother and daughter] cause or effect?" Woodside asks. "... You can't tell whether the strain is a pre-existing factor that is associated with the development of binge

eating or whether it is actually an effect of the binge eating because people with eating problems have problems in their families as a consequence of being ill.”

Meanwhile, Sherry cautions that this research was not about laying blame on mothers or daughters. Instead, it shows that “the people you find yourself in proximity to can have an influence on you.” For too long, he notes, binge eating was characterized as strictly an individual problem. “Our research challenges the notion that binge eating is driven entirely by individual traits ... and rather than blaming parents, I think our research empowers parents to realize that they can have a small and meaningful impact on their children’s mental health.”

Mushquash agrees: “Now we know that there is a relationship here, so what can we do about it? If moms do have a strong impact on their daughters’ mood and disordered eating, that means they potentially could have a positive influence.”