

## Emotional responses to images of food in adults with an eating disorder: A comparative study with healthy and clinical controls

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Previous research suggests that eating disorders are associated with strong negative emotional reactions towards food and eating. However, it has been unclear if this association is due to a unique characteristic of eating disorder symptomology or if it is an effect of a more general state of negative emotions, typical of the depression and anxiety symptoms that frequently co-occur with eating disorders. Hay and Katsikitis (2014) examined this issue by comparing the emotional reactions to food stimuli of 3 groups of participants: a group diagnosed with an eating disorder (n=26), a group control group diagnosed with a psychiatric condition but no eating disorder (n=20), and a group of healthy controls (n=61).

Participants in all groups viewed a PowerPoint slide presentation of 16 images of food interspersed with 4 images of non-food objects. The non-food objects were included to check the validity of participants' responses by making sure that they were not responding to all slides with the same response. Participants were asked to rate their levels of fear, happiness, and disgust separately for each image. They were also asked to rate their levels of these emotions prior to viewing the slideshow. In the statistical analyses, the researchers controlled for the baseline levels of emotion, which were significantly different for the eating disorder group when compared to the psychiatric control group and the healthy control group. Results indicate that participants with an eating disorder reported significantly greater levels of disgust and fear when compared with both a psychiatric control group and a healthy control group. In addition, participants with an eating disorder reported lower levels of happiness in response to food images than non-eating disordered participants.

The authors conclude that people with an eating disorder tend to have a heightened aversive emotional response and a blunted positive emotional response to food images. Results indicate that these emotional responses are a unique feature of eating disorder symptomology and are not due to comorbid psychiatric conditions, such as depression or anxiety. The authors suggest that therapeutic interventions should focus on these primary emotional states of fear, disgust, and happiness. This study emphasizes the importance of helping patients return a sense of pleasure and joy to their eating experiences.

Reference: Hay, P. and Katsikitis, M. (2014) Emotional responses to images of food in adults with an eating disorder: A comparative study with healthy and clinical controls. *Eating Behaviors*, 15: 371-374