

The Relationship between Body Mass Index, Binge Eating Disorder, and Suicidality
Research Summary by Alexis Conason, Psy.D., iaedpny Research Liaison

As eating disorder professionals, many of us know that our patients with anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are at increased risk for suicidal behaviors. But what about our patients with binge eating disorder (BED)? Few studies have examined the relationship between BED and suicidality, especially factoring in the role that weight may play. Prior research supports an inverse linear relationship between suicidality and BMI; people with a BMI in the “underweight” category are at the highest risk and people with BMI in the “overweight” and “obese” categories are at a lower risk. However, some studies suggest that people with a BMI >40 may also be at an increased risk for suicidal behaviors.

Brown et al. (2018) examined data from 14,497 participants in a large, diverse, nationally representative US database (the Collaborative Psychiatric Epidemiologic Surveys) to assess whether binge eating and BMI are associated with suicidality and if the relationship between binge eating and suicidality may be exacerbated by BMI. They also explored whether these relationships differed by gender.

Results indicated that among participants with a history of binge eating (approximately 4% of the sample), 1/3 (34.2%) reported ever thinking about suicide, 1/5 (18.6%) had a history of attempted suicide, and 10.1% experienced suicidality in the past year. Results were similar for those with a history of binge eating and those who met full criteria for BED, indicating that the risks of subclinical binge eating may be similar to the full-spectrum disorder. Binge eating and BED were significantly associated with lifetime suicidality, and BMI did not affect this relationship. The relationship between binge eating and suicidality was stronger for women than for men. Results also indicated a significant interaction between BMI and binge eating on the likelihood of suicidality, meaning that those with binge eating who were at a higher BMI were at higher risk for suicidality.

Unfortunately, this study did not examine the role of weight stigma so we do not know what impact that has in the relationship between BED, BMI, and suicidality. Prior research suggests that weight stigma increases the risk of eating disorders and disordered eating, including binge eating and BED, and it may likely also play a role in the increased risk of suicidality for people struggling with binge eating who live in larger bodies. That’s my 2 cents. What do you think of the findings of this study? Share your thoughts on our iaedpny Facebook page.

Reference: Brown KL, LaRose JG, and Mezuk B. (2018) The Relationship between Body Mass Index, Binge Eating Disorder, and Suicidality. *BMC Psychiatry*, 18: 196