

Stress-Induced Eating During Examination Periods

“A Literature Review Among University Students”

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Introduction

Stress is a psychological and physiological response to demanding or threatening situations. University students commonly experience elevated stress levels during examination periods due to academic workload, performance expectations, and time pressure. Stress can influence eating behaviors, leading students to either increase consumption of certain foods or reduce their food intake altogether. These stress-related changes in eating patterns are commonly referred to as stress-induced eating or emotional eating.

Understanding how academic stress affects dietary habits is important because these changes can impact students' nutritional status, mental well-being, and academic performance. This review synthesizes findings from several studies that explore the relationship between examination stress and eating behaviors among university students.

Overview of Key Studies

1. Stress Levels and Eating Behavior Among University Students

The study published in the Journal of Education and Health Promotion examined stress and eating habits among university students and found that stress was significantly associated with unhealthy eating patterns. Over half of the students reported dissatisfaction with their eating habits, and about 60% of those under stress tended toward unhealthy foods (e.g., sweets), which can contribute to weight gain and poor diet quality. Approximately 40% experienced increased desire to eat when stressed. The study emphasized the role of stress in prompting maladaptive eating responses and advocated for stress-reduction strategies and healthier dietary practices among students.

2. Impact of Exam Stress on Eating Habits in Erbil Students

A cross-sectional study conducted in Erbil, Iraq, found that 87% of participants experienced stress during the examination period, affecting not just mood and sleep but also eating habits. Some students (34%) reported increased appetite, while others (39%) reported decreased appetite. A notable portion of respondents skipped meals regularly or occasionally during exams. These findings indicate that stress alters eating patterns in complex ways, including both overeating and under-eating, highlighting the individual variability in stress responses.

3. Disordered Eating and Stress Associations During Exams

An MDPI article investigated disordered eating behaviors among students during exam periods. It showed that academic stress is correlated with symptoms of disordered eating and insomnia. Students with higher stress levels exhibited more irregular meal patterns and tendencies toward compulsive or disordered eating behaviors, demonstrating that stress during exams extends beyond simple changes in appetite and can be associated with clinically important eating issues.

4. Broader Literature on Stress, Dietary Intake, and Eating Behavior

Other related research supports these findings. Clinical Nutrition research indicates that academic examination stress influences dietary intake and can alter food choices, often increasing intake of high-fat or energy-dense foods among students, especially those with high trait anxiety or low social support.

Additionally, broader reviews and studies show that stress can lead to both over-eating and under-eating depending on the individual, with some students consuming more high-sugar or high-fat “comfort foods” and others losing appetite due to heightened stress responses.

Common Themes Across the Literature

1. Stress Triggers Changes in Eating Behavior

Multiple studies demonstrate that examination stress affects eating patterns, though the direction and magnitude of change can vary. Some students respond to stress with increased appetite or craving for comfort foods, while others eat less or skip meals altogether.

2. Individual Factors Modify Stress-Eating Responses

Variables such as gender, body mass index (BMI), and social support appear to influence how stress impacts eating. For example, in the Erbil study, gender and BMI were significantly correlated with appetite changes during exams.

3. Emotional Eating as a Coping Mechanism

Emotional eating - eating in response to negative emotions such as anxiety or tension, is a common pattern among stressed students. It is biologically linked to stress hormones such as cortisol influencing appetite and food preferences.

Discussion

The cumulative evidence indicates that examination stress is a significant factor influencing eating behavior among university students. While some students exhibit increased intake of unhealthy snacks and comfort foods, others eat less or skip meals entirely, reflecting the diverse ways stress impacts eating habits. These patterns can have short- and long-term effects on health, including poor diet quality, weight changes, and potential development of disordered eating behaviors.

The literature suggests that interventions focusing on stress management, nutrition education, and emotional regulation may help students adopt healthier eating habits during stressful academic periods.

Conclusion

This literature review shows a clear association between examination stress and changes in eating behavior among university students. Stress can lead to unhealthy eating patterns, including increased consumption of energy-dense foods, irregular eating, and skipped meals. Recognizing these stress-related dietary changes is important for developing supportive strategies in university settings to enhance both nutritional and psychological well-being.

References

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