Emotional eating as a mediator between depression and weight gain

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Abstract
Depression is often associated with weight gain but underlying mechanisms are unclear. This study assessed whether three psychological eating styles (emotional eating, external eating and restrained eating) act as mediators between depression and weight gain. We used structural equation modelling to test the hypothesized mediation models in a sample of 298 fathers and 294 mothers by assessing self-reported eating styles (Dutch Eating Behavior Questionnaire), depressive feelings (Depressive Mood List) and body mass index (BMI) at baseline and BMI after five years. In the model with emotional eating we also assessed the moderation effect of 5-HTTLPR genotype in a sub-sample of 520 Caucasians. All analyses were performed separately for the two sexes. Although the overall effect of depression on weight gain was statistically non-significant in both sexes, there was a causal chain between depression, emotional eating and weight gain in the mothers. Depressive symptoms were related to higher emotional eating and emotional eating predicted greater increases in BMI independently of depression. Moreover, the indirect effect (via emotional eating) of depression on BMI change was significant (Beta = 0.18, P = 0.026). This mediation effect was found to be independent of 5-HTTLPR genotype. No such mediation effect was found for the fathers. Further, external eating and restrained eating did not act as mediators between depression and weight gain in either sex. The finding that emotional eating acted as mediator between depression and weight gain in the mothers suggests that obesity interventions should take emotional eating into account.

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1. Introduction

Meta-analyses of longitudinal studies suggest that depression and obesity are reciprocally linked, with obesity increasing the risk for depression (Luppino et al., 2010) and depression predicting later weight gain and obesity (Blaine, 2008; Luppino et al., 2010). Depression and obesity are common conditions with severe medical consequences (Alonso et al., 2004; Berghöfer et al., 2008). Because numbers of obesity and depression are still rising (Mathers & Loncar, 2006) there is an urgent need to reduce the incidence of obesity and depression. The exploration of possible underlying mechanisms in the depression-obesity link may provide the key. Here we focus on mechanisms underlying the impact of depressive feelings on subsequent weight gain. Various physiological, psychological and behavioural mechanisms may be involved and in this study three different psychological eating styles are tested as underlying mechanisms.

The first possible mediator of the depression-weight gain link is emotional eating. Emotional eating is eating in response to negative emotions such as depressive feelings. Feeling depressed is normally associated with loss of appetite and subsequent weight loss, however, a depression subtype exists, which is characterized by the a-
The evolutionary adaptive and biologically ‘natural’ response to distress is loss of appetite and weight loss because distress is associated with physiological reactions designed to prepare the individual for a fight-or-flight reaction: inhibition of gastric motility and promotion of the release of sugar to the bloodstream, thereby suppressing feelings of hunger (Gold & Chrousos, 2002).
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