Food & Feelings: Maintaining Healthy Eating Patterns During COVID

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Disclosures
- No financial conflicts of interest to disclose.
- The opinions expressed in this presentation do not represent the official position of Nebraska Medicine.
- Be aware: humor is a primary coping/defense mechanism of mine 😊

Learning Objectives
1. Discuss common eating patterns experienced by women during the pandemic, including statistical trends surrounding eating disorders.
2. Articulate tips for managing stress and emotional eating during COVID, and how to develop or maintain a healthy relationship with food despite the related challenges of facing a global pandemic.
3. Describe the importance of expanding outside the use of traditional coping skills (especially during isolation periods) and practicing self-compassion with health behaviors.
**COVID-19 Pandemic: STRESS**

- Increase in stress
  - Collective anxiety/trauma related to COVID-19 & related socio-political strife
  - Limited supplies
  - Working from home while home schooling
  - Unprecedented isolation for many
  - Loss of rituals, routines, including outlets and typical coping mechanisms for many

- Decrease in physical activity
  - Ableism issues and decreased access to services
  - Lack of access to safe places to be outside for some

- Access to fresh foods replaced by non-perishable/frozen items
  - Increased food insecurity for many (especially low-income families)

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**Understandable Rise in Mental Health Disorders**

- **Pandemic Causes Spike in Anxiety & Depression**
  - A new report shows a sharp increase in anxiety and depression
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- **Second highest mortality rate of any psychiatric diagnosis**

- **Types**
  - Anorexia Nervosa
    - 82% worsening of symptoms at onset of pandemic
  - Bulimia
  - Binge Eating Disorder
    - 1/3 reported an increase in binge episodes since
  - OSFED (Emotional Eating)
  - Causes. Multifactorial and biopsychosocial

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  - Second highest mortality rate of any psychiatric diagnosis
  - Types
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Pandemic Led to Rise in Eating Disorders

- Rise in new cases and relapses
- 70-80% increase in NEDA hotline calls (“in recent months” Sept. 2020)
- Longer waitlists for treatment
- Stigma and disparity
- More common among transgender/nonbinary

Rise Among Eating Disorders in Teens

- Changes in routine
- Lack of social connections
- Primary source of identity for so many adolescents
- Heightened anxiety
- Increased use of social media
- Weight shaming memes
- Schools locked down
- Extracurriculars suspended
- Constant access to food (for some)

What Made Teens More Vulnerable?

- Eating Disorders: Biopsychosocial disorder of isolation
- Mean age of onset: 12.5 years
- Lack of Control
- Prefrontal Cortex
- Social Media

References:
Effects of Social Media

My Personal Story … How I Gained (then lost) “the Quarantine 15”
Stress and Emotional Eating

- Emotional or “Stress Eating” differs from occasional use of food as reward/remedy.
  - Food becomes a primary coping mechanism.
  - Physical hunger becomes difficult to distinguish from cravings (the result of stress or negative emotion).
- Strongly linked to stress:
  - Short-term: reduced appetite
  - Long-term: persistent stress increases cortisol, increasing appetite.
- “Comfort foods” and dopamine: the “reward” neurotransmitter.

Comfort Food & The Motivational Triad

- Motivational food:
  - Our instinct is to seek out foods high in fat/sugar/salt = dopamine.
  - Dopamine leads to a subnormal amount of pleasure when eating these foods.
  - Note however, these foods don’t make you feel full and are calorically dense.
  - Leads to weight gain, BG spike/crash/withdrawal.
For further information…

**Motivational Triad**

- **Intense Emotions & Impulsive Behavior**

- Do you ever notice that you are much more impulsive with your choices when your emotions are especially intense?

- Why? Emotions get in the way of clear and rational thinking

**Cycle of Suffering…**
Breaking the Cycle of Suffering

The Three A's:
- Awareness
- Acceptance
- Action

1) Awareness
- What emotion are you "feeding"?
- Feelings are an important guide if we don't ignore them.
- Emotional Word Wheel
  - If you struggle to name your emotions, i.e., "good" vs "bad"?
  - Start on the inside, work your way out

1) Awareness
- Self-reflect on your eating
- What are your typical eating patterns?
- Do they change in times of stress?
- Do you eat more or less?
- Do you crave specific kinds of food when you feel a certain way?
- Do these foods make you feel better or worse?
- Consider Keeping a Food/Mood Journal
3) Action: Urge-Surfing
- Slow down to observe cravings, and urges to eat, and mindfully choose.
- Ride the wave, rather than giving into the urge and being wiped out by it.
- Know it will grow in intensity before it will peak and then subside.
- [Link](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RlA2ewXayTc)

3) Action: Eat Mindfully
- Mindfulness
  - Focus on one moment at a time
  - Remain present
- Mindful Eating
  - Sit down, remove distractions, eat slowly, pay attention to each bite
  - Consider using cues for "check ins".

3) Action: Tune Into to Your Body
- Understand Your Hunger Cues
  - Avoid getting "hangry"
  - Aim to stay between 4-7 on the "hunger scale"
- Eat Well Balanced Meals
  - Don’t underestimate the impact of food on mood!
  - Consider prepping easy meals ahead.
3) Action – Use Emotions As Your Guide

- What do you Need?
  - Sleep or rest
  - Catharsis (expressing feelings: i.e., crying, journaling)
  - Being heard, understood, accepted
  - Feeling connected
  - Receiving comfort and warmth
  - Sensual pleasure
  - Being intellectually/creatively stimulated
  - Having a sense of purpose/direction
  - Fun/laughter
  - Distraction from boredom

Prep ahead:
Self-Care “First Aid” Kit

3) Action: Find a Distraction

- Call a friend or family member
- Paint your nails
- Take a shower/bath
- Color, do a hobby/craft
- Going for a walk
- Yoga or gentle stretching
- Sudoku or puzzle
- Netflix
- Read a book
- Connect with religious/spiritual organization
- Take an online class

3) Action: Self-Soothing

- Seek out social connection
- If needed, be creative while maintaining social distance
- Grounding techniques (i.e., 54321)
- Sensory soothing items
- Meditation/formal relaxation (10-15/day total) associated with multiple health benefits
- Free apps:

Spunky realized he was not cut out to be an emotional support dog.
3) Action: Daily Routine/Structure

- Daily physical exercise/movement
- Maintain adequate nutrition: incorporate structure via regular mealtimes. Avoid mindless trips to the kitchen, and keep only healthy snacks in your workspace.
- Maintain good sleep hygiene: get enough sleep (6-8 hours for most), establish a regular sleep schedule, avoid caffeine & electronics before bed, reduce irregular/daytime naps.

3) Action: Limit Media Consumption

- With "news," MORE is not BETTER. Focus on QUALITY vs. QUANTITY. Recommend no more than 30 min AM/PM.
- Dangers of Social Comparison: frequent source of added stress or low self-esteem. Be aware most people don't advertise their struggles.

3) Action: Practice Self-Compassion

Me reading about Coronavirus 30 seconds after I swore I wouldn't read about Coronavirus anymore.
3) Action: Love Yourself Unconditionally
- Know that your worth is UNCONDITIONAL
- Focus on “progress NOT perfection,” allow yourself to eat for pleasure
- ShAME VS. “shoulds”
- Monitor your overall health
- Allow what is important to you to be your guide

3) Action: Be Patient & Keep Going
- Neuroplasticity
  - Changing behavior requires changing your brain
  - This takes time!
  - Enlist your “thinking brain” by visualizing life improving
  - Celebrate the small victories
  - Motivation FOLLOWS Action
- Do not put yourself “on a diet”

Additional Reading Options
What Can Concerned Parents Do?

- Without being intrusive, keep an eye on what your kids are (and are not) eating.
- Find a balance between the mentalities: “clear your plate” vs. “figure it out”
- Remain active in their lives.
- Know what they are doing.
- Ask what they are reading and be aware of the messages being conveyed on social media.
- Emphasize the importance of eating for health/weight versus appearance or body size.
- Discuss the importance of inner confidence. Beauty comes from being a good person that cares for others.

Resources

- To find out more about whether you may have emotional eating versus an eating disorder, or get help in dealing with an eating disorder, you can contact “NEDA” to 741741 to reach a trained volunteer at the group’s crisis text line.

Local Treatment Resources:

- ED Care
- Omni Inventive Care Eating Disorder Program
- Counseling Connections & Associates Eating Disorder Treatment Omaha | Counseling Connections & Associates (ccaomaha.com)

Screening Resource for Medical Providers

- Eating disorders affect at least 9% of people worldwide. They will affect nearly 30 million Americans in their lifetimes and cause about 10,000 U.S. deaths each year (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, 2021)*
Other considerations for medical providers:

- Physicians may fail to diagnose an eating disorder if they associate the condition with being underweight. In such cases, they focus on the overweight or obesity—not the underlying reason for it.
- Telling someone with obesity, “You just need to lose weight” is counterproductive if they have an eating disorder.
- Such patients should be referred to your behavioral health consultant or eating disorder treatment provider.

References


Contact Information for additional questions

- kvacek@nebraskamed.com
- Please contact me if you should have any additional questions.