

MoodFOOD

PREVENTING DEPRESSION THROUGH FOOD

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Summary:

Depression is often associated with weight gain but underlying mechanisms are unclear. In a prospective study with a five-year follow-up we 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 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. All analyses were performed separately for the two sexes.

The overall effect of depression on weight gain was statistically non-significant in both sexes. An explanation is that the association with weight change runs in different directions in the two depression subtypes, with weight loss in the typical, classic depression subtype and weight gain in the atypical depression subtype, such that the depression-weight gain link in the pooled data is not significant.

In the mothers there was a causal chain between depression, emotional eating and weight gain. 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, $p = 0.026$). 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 main finding is thus that the weight gain in the depressed mothers was a result of their emotional eating. Emotional eaters eat when they are sad, frustrated or down. This suggests that people who overeat when they are depressed should be treated differently than those who lose their appetite.

Dividing depression into subcategories is still a fairly recent phenomenon in research, but looking at tendency to emotional eating is an effective tool to do just that. The present findings suggest that the emotional element of eating should be tackled when treating people who overeat when depressed. 'Emotion regulation therapy' seems very suitable for this. Apart from treating emotional eating it was earlier found to reduce depression as well.