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HK RESEARCHERS FIND:

'Feeling inferior causes overeating'

BY BEN KRITZ, TMT ON JANUARY 10, 2017

HEALTH INDUSTRY

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FEELING socially inferior causes people to prefer unhealthy foods and eat 65 percent more, a study by psychology researchers in Hong Kong said.

The findings of the research by the research team from Nanyang Technological University and Chinese University of Hong Kong were published late last month in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science.

The study explained that among social animals, being low in a group hierarchy is linked to an increased intake of food and fat accumulation, a strategy thought to compensate for the additional stress of having low social status. The study further noted that poor socioeconomic status in humans is also linked to adverse health outcomes such as obesity and diabetes.

Study co-author Bobby Cheon, an assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University's School of Humanities and Social Sciences, explained, "As a social psychologist, questions of how people navigate status hierarchies and made sense of their own social standing were always of interest to me. In this study, we questioned whether the relationship between low socioeconomic status and obesity required an actual deficit in social and economic resources, or whether the mere perception or feeling of a deficiency was sufficient."

To trigger feelings of inferior social status in the test subjects, Cheon and Professor Hong Ying-yi from the Chinese University of Hong Kong showed them an image of a ladder representing society and asked them to compare themselves to either people at the top of the ladder or the bottom of the ladder.

"The idea is that most people are going to feel relatively lacking or deprived of these resources that represent status when comparing themselves with the top rung of the ladder, which produces a feeling of being low in social class or rank," Cheon explained.

The researcher noted that the feelings were somewhat different than those caused by actual low social status, but that the test subjects' reactions were similar.

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"This manipulation doesn't seem to produce the feelings of stress and insecurity that is associated with actual low socioeconomic status or poverty. Yet this makes the manipulation even more appropriate since we are seeking to demonstrate that increased appetite associated with feelings of low socioeconomic status is not simply a result of eating in response to stress."

The study found that participants who were made to feel socially inferior were more likely to associate food like pizza and fried chicken with pleasant words, which the researchers concluded meant that they subconsciously preferred high-calorie foods.

In addition, when the subjects were offered snacks after the experimental manipulation of socioeconomic status, the low socioeconomic status group consumed 65 percent more calories than the high socioeconomic status group, the study said.

These results indicated that feeling socially inferior not only changes the perception of food but can trigger actual food intake, Cheon said.

"One snacking or meal session in a laboratory may not be especially meaningful. But, for people who chronically feel low subjective socioeconomic status, this may translate to a modest but persistent increase in caloric intake that may gradually develop into obesity over an extended period of time," he explained.

The researchers said they plan to extend their work by studying other physiological responses to feelings of inferiority, particularly appetite-related hormones such as leptin and ghrelin.

"Our research suggests that, independent of actual financial deprivation or stress associated with poverty and low socioeconomic status, simply feeling poor is a potential risk factor for excess caloric intake," Cheon said.

"Interventions targeting obesity among people of lower socioeconomic means may need to address these psychological factors in addition to facilitating access to healthier diets," the study concluded.

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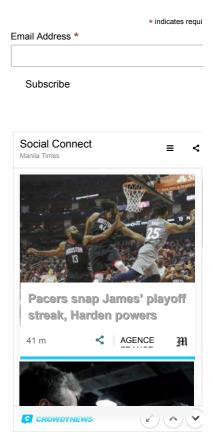


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