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HK RESEARCHERS FIND:

'Feeling inferior causes overeating'

BY BEN KRITZ, TMT ON JANUARY 10, 2017

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HEALTH INDUSTRY

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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