The Relation between Disordered Eating, Stress, and Anxiety in First-Year College Women

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The Relation Between Disordered Eating, Stress, and Anxiety in First-Year College Women

Jenna K. Anderson, BA & Elizabeth K. Lefler, PhD

Introduction

- Research has shown that there is an increase in rates of stress and disordered eating for college students, especially women (Costarelli & Patsai, 2012).
- The current study examined this connection by determining the relation between disordered eating, stress, and anxiety in first-year college women.
- Past research has routinely shown a correlation between stress and disordered eating.
- According to a review by Ball & Lee (2000), evidence of relations between stress and disordered eating was obtained in the majority of studies reviewed, suggesting a common trend.
- While these results do not determine a causal direction, other studies suggest that disordered eating is a response mechanism to stress (Root, 1991).
- Research examining the relation between anxiety and disordered eating has been mixed (Vardar et al., 2007).

Hypotheses

- **Hypothesis 1**: For first-year college women there will be a significant positive Pearson’s correlation between disordered eating and stress.
- **Hypothesis 2**: For first-year college women there will be a significant positive Pearson’s correlation between disordered eating and anxiety.

Method

- Participants in this study were first-year college women (n=99) from UNI.
- Sample was primarily Caucasian/White (88.8%), with fewer identifying as African American/Black (3.03%), Asian American/Asian (4.04%), Multiracial (2.02%), or unidentified (2.02%).
- Most participants were 18 years old (83.8%) or 19 years old (13.1%), and some chose not to answer that question (3.03%).
- Participants were recruited in two ways.
- Online participants management pool
- In-person, in first-year classes.
- Each participant gave consent and went into a private room to complete a survey packet containing several paper-and-pencil measures/questionnaires.
- Depressions Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) and the Eating Disorders Examination Questionnaire (EDE-Q)
- Participants were debriefed and given a sheet with their depression screener score and a list of mental health resources on the university campus.

Results

- DASS-21 stress sum was significantly correlated with the EDE-Q total disordered eating sum (r(92) = .33, p = .004).
- Hypothesis 1 was supported.
- DASS-21 anxiety sum was not significantly correlated with EDE-Q total disordered eating (r(92) = .08, p = .473).
- Hypothesis 2 was not supported.
- Other analyses were examined by evaluating the relation between subscales of the DASS-EQ and DASS-21 to determine if specific types of disordered eating were correlated to a greater extent than others (see Table 1).
- These results seem to match other data (Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2013; Striegel-Moore et al., 1989).
- The results suggest that college mental health resources should be focused on reducing stress and identifying eating problems in the transition to college.

Discussion

- The results of the current study indicate that as rates of stress increase, so too do the rates of disordered eating in first-year college women.
- The same can not be said for anxiety and disordered eating, which were not correlated in this sample.
- Further analyses indicated that DASS-21 stress was significantly correlated with four of the five subscales from the EDE-Q, whereas DASS-21 anxiety was only significantly correlated with one of five.

Implications

- College campus administrators should be aware of these findings as they plan for mental health and well-being resources for their students.
- Students need to become aware of the relation and work toward reducing stress and eating properly.
- It is possible that if disordered eating goes unchecked, a clinical eating disorder can develop.
- Specific interventions should be considered to combat disordered eating in college students.
- Mindfulness meditation (Katterman et al., 2014).

Table of Correlations

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<th>3</th>
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Note: * p < .05, ** p < .01, n = 94-99

References