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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 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 (88.5%), 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 participant 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:
  • Depression 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 and in the community.
• If they scored in the moderate or significant risk range, or if recent and frequent episodes of self-harm, they were debriefed by a graduate student and given the option to be walked to the student health center, make a call, or decline all options.
• Participants received a choice of compensation in the form of one research credit or an $8 gift card to either Starbucks or Subway.

Results

• DASS-21 stress sum was significantly correlated with the EDE-Q total disordered eating sum (r(92) = .33, p = .001).
• 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-21 and the Eating Disorders Examination Questionnaire 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 out of the five subscales from the EDE-Q, whereas DASS-21 anxiety was only significantly correlated with one of five.
• 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).

References


Table of Correlations

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</table>

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, n = 94-99

Future Directions

• Future studies should aim to evaluate these variables in populations with greater gender differentiation, more ethnic variation, and levels of functioning.
• Multiple measures should be used and studies should be conducted in other geographic locations.
• Future studies should seek to determine if these results can be replicated.

Limitations

• Use of a sample of only women
• Primarily white
• Limited use of measures
• High-functioning sample