

The Role of Self-esteem and Body Shame in Eating Disorder Risk for Adolescents Classified as “Obese” and “Normal Weight”

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Individuals who meet BMI criteria for “obesity” are at increased risk for developing an eating disorder; particularly binge eating disorder. Obesity typically precedes development of an eating disorder (rather than the eating disorder being the cause of obesity) and it is unclear what variables contribute to this increased risk. In a study published in *Eating Behaviors*, Iannaccone et al (2016) investigated what psychological variables are associated with ED risk in individuals classified as “obese” versus “normal weight.”

The researchers evaluated 111 adolescents aged 13-19 classified according to BMI as “obese” (N=111, males=68, females=43). They also evaluated 111 “normal weight” control participants matched for age, sex, and social status (N=111). All participants attended public high school in Southern Italy and completed questionnaires to assess parental bonding, self-esteem, shame, perfectionism, eating disturbance, and BMI.

Confirming prior research, results of this study indicated that participants classified as “obese” were more likely to report dysfunctional eating behaviors (including overeating with loss of control) and compensatory behaviors than “normal weight” participants. Out of all of the psychological variables that the researchers examined, only body shame was associated with ED risk in “obese” participants. This one variable explained 39% of the variance. In contrast, for “normal weight” control participants there were a number of factors that were associated with ED risk including gender, BMI, maternal care, and body shame. Combined, these variables explained 48% of the variance.

Previous research has identified self-esteem as a key factor in the development of ED symptoms. However, the current study did not find self-esteem to have a direct association to ED risk. To further explore the relationships between self-esteem, body shame, and ED risk, the researchers conducted a mediation analysis. Self-esteem and body shame are strongly associated but mediation analysis revealed that body shame fully mediated the effect of self-esteem on ED risk in both “obese” and “normal weight” participants. Thus, it seems as though body shame, more than self-esteem, is the contributing factor to development of disordered eating symptoms.

This study highlights the destructive role that body shame can play in the onset of disordered eating. Body shame plays a particularly significant role in the development of ED symptoms in adolescents who meet BMI criteria for “obesity” and emerged as the one variable most responsible for the development of ED symptoms in this population. This finding is especially disturbing when you consider the fact that adolescents classified as “obese” are likely at increased risk for experiencing body shame, which initiates a vicious cycle. “Obese” bodies are pathologized, stigmatized, and devalued in most Western cultures, which leads to body shame for people who inhabit these bodies. The researchers emphasize the

importance of interventions to address feelings of ineffectiveness and body shame in adolescents classified as “obese.”

Reference:

Iannaccone M, D'Olimpio F, Cella S, & Cotrufo P. (2016). Self-esteem, body shame, and eating disorder risk in obese and normal weight adolescents: A mediation model. *Eating Behaviors, 21*: 80-83.