

Emotion regulation in emotional and addictive eating behaviour

¹ Centre for Addictive Disorders, Department of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics, Psychiatric Hospital, University of Zurich

² Neuropsychopharmacology and Brain Imaging, Department of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics, Psychiatric Hospital, University of Zurich

Background

Eating is of homeostatic and hedonistic nature to ensure survival. However, when eating behaviour mainly serves emotion regulation instead of energy homeostasis, addictive-like mechanisms may underlie this shift. Analogues to addiction for psychoactive substances, craving seems at the core of addictive eating behaviour. Since emotion regulation is generally disrupted in addiction and is likely linked to craving, we here investigate the relationship of craving, emotion regulation and emotional eating in individuals with food addiction (FA).

Methods

Participants were recruited from the general Swiss population (via newsletters and social media) and in cooperation with institutions specialised in eating disorders and obesity to participate in an online survey. The survey was anonymous and comprised the following questionnaires:

- Yale Food Addiction Scale 2.0 (YFAS)
- Salzburg Emotional Eating Scale (SEES)
- Generalized Expectancies for Negative Mood Regulation Scale (NMR).

Results

Participants

The survey was completed by 328 participants (274 females, age $M = 34.2 \pm 13.6$, BMI $M = 24.7 \pm 5.9$). In total 25.9% met YFAS diagnostic criteria for FA. Thereof, 75.3% manifested a severe form of FA (see Fig. 1).

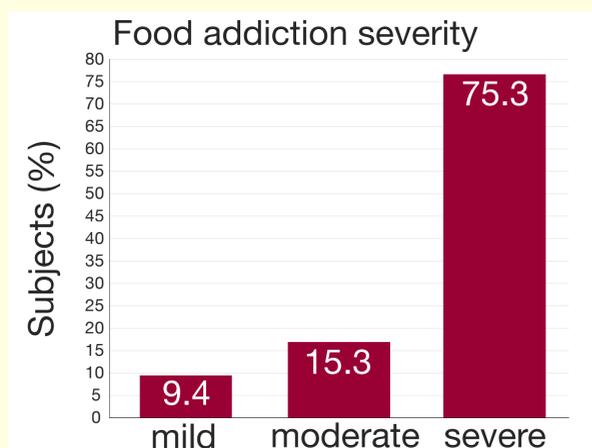


Figure 1: Percentage of subjects meeting criteria of food addiction (FA) severity. Food addiction was assessed by the Yale Food Addiction Scale 2.0. Mild FA: ≥ 2 and < 4 symptoms, moderate FA: ≥ 4 and < 6 symptoms, severe

Food Addiction and Emotion Regulation

Those individuals with FA were characterized by poorer emotion regulation ($M_{NoFA} = 105.7 \pm 14.2$, $M_{FA} = 86.1 \pm 17$, $p = .000$).

Results

Food Addiction and Emotional Eating

Individuals with FA showed more frequent emotional eating when confronting negative emotions than controls ($M_{NoFA} = 2.9 \pm 0.38$, $M_{FA} = 3.4 \pm 0.47$, $p = .000$). Conversely, controls showed higher emotional eating only when experiencing positive emotions (see Fig. 2).

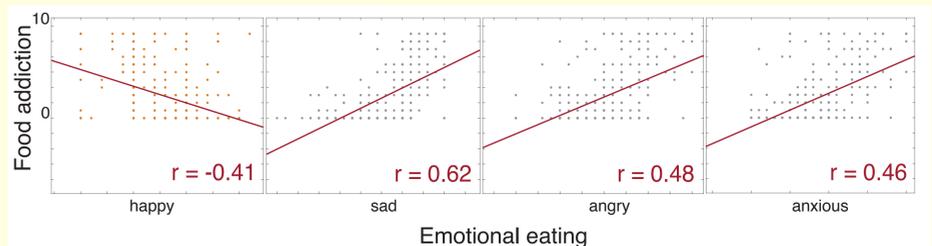


Figure 2: Spearman correlations between food addiction and emotional eating. Food addiction correlates negatively to positive emotions and positively to negative emotions.

Moreover, emotion regulation skills were negatively linked to food craving ($r_s = -0.52$, $p = .000$) and emotional eating ($r_s = 0.3$, $p = .000$), while food craving correlated positively with emotional eating ($r_s = 0.58$, $p = .000$).

In order to investigate a model of FA development, we computed a path model including emotion regulation and emotional eating as predictive variables for food addiction. The path model analysis confirmed that the empirical data is consistent with the model ($R^2 = 0.37$, see Fig. 3).

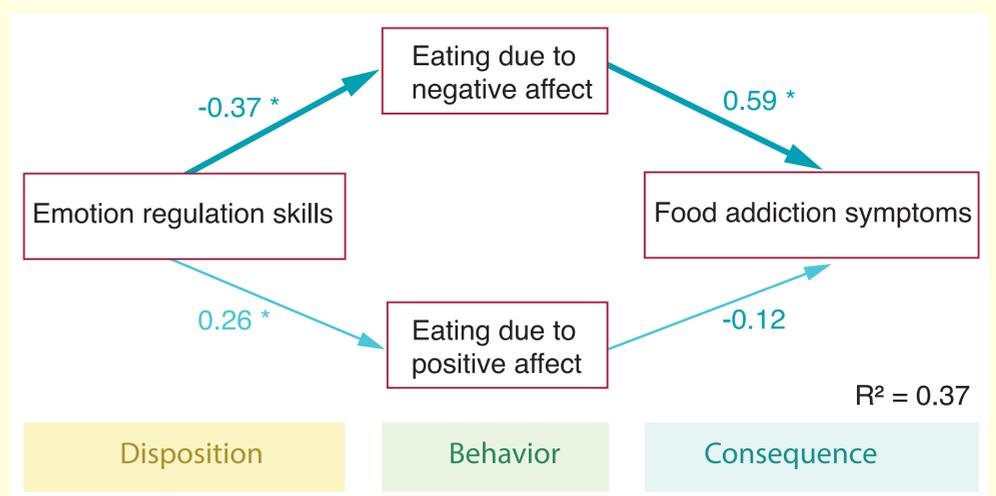


Figure 3: Path model for prediction of food addiction. Emotion regulation skills are negatively linked to eating when experiencing negative affect and this path leads to increased food addiction symptoms.

Conclusion

- Addictive-like eating behavior exists in Switzerland
- Addictive behaviours are linked to negative affect rather than hedonistic pleasure
- Deficits of emotion regulation in food addiction are linked with emotional eating during negative affect
- Emotion regulation and eating in distress might serve as a regulatory strategy