

Uncertainty fear and eating disorders linked

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People who fear the unknown or view uncertainty as especially negative or threatening are more likely to report symptoms of eating disorders, according to new ANU research.

Alice Heikkinen, a PhD researcher in the Department of Psychology, has been looking at women aged 18-30 and has found a significant link between eating disorder symptoms and intolerance of uncertainty.

“Specifically, uncertainty in many of the cases I studied included things like being unsure of the exact calorie content or composition of food or uncertainty about the impact foods may have on body [weight](#),” she said.

“People who have difficulty in these areas tend to be more concerned about their weight or shape, leading to habits like avoiding unfamiliar or new foods with unclear ingredients, or constantly jumping on the bathroom scales.

“This sort of dietary restraint and obsessive behaviour can be symptomatic of an eating disorder.”

Ms Heikkinen said participants were assessed on eating-specific and general intolerance of uncertainty, such as not knowing what will happen tomorrow, together with measures of eating disorder symptoms and other related factors like perfectionism.

“While we found that the relationship between general intolerance of uncertainty and eating disorder symptoms was small but significant, we

discovered that the link with eating-specific intolerance was particularly strong,” she said.

“These results suggest that individuals with a high intolerance of uncertainty may engage in problematic behaviours in an attempt to reduce any ambiguity, for example, setting strict rules about what to eat.

“It may also prompt over-exercise or frequently seeking reassurance about weight in an attempt to reduce any sense of uncertainty about the impact of food on weight or the possibility of having gained weight,” she said.

“They may even be less motivated to engage in [eating disorder](#) treatment due to the uncertainty involved in doing so. For instance, they may be afraid of regaining weight and the uncertain impact that recovery may have on areas of their life such as their relationships and sense of self.

“An intolerance of [uncertainty](#) could serve as an important consideration in understanding and addressing rigid or restrictive eating behaviors.”

Provided by Australian National University

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