

Habits, not cravings, drive food choice during times of stress

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Putting a new spin on the concept of "stress eating," research presented at the 2013 Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) Annual Meeting & Expo found that people who eat during times of stress typically seek the foods they eat out of habit – regardless of how healthy or unhealthy that food is.

The research co-authored and presented by David Neal, Ph.D., a psychologist and founding partner at Empirica Research, contradicts the conventional wisdom that people who are stressed-out turn to high-calorie, low-nutrient comfort food.

"Habits don't change in a high-pressure situation," Neal said. "People default to what their habits are under [stress](#), whether healthy or not."

In the study he and his co-authors conducted this year, 59 MBA students at the University of California, Los Angeles, were asked during midterm exams which snack they would like from an array that included healthy snacks (fruit, non-fat yogurt, whole wheat crackers, nuts/soy chips) and unhealthy options (various candy bars, flavored popcorn, sugar cookies). They also were asked to rate how often during the week they choose that snack. The results found that during peak stress like an exam, participants were likely to fall back on their habitual snack.

"Habits are 45 percent of daily life," Neal said. "They cause us to disregard rational or motivational drivers and instead be cued by context, automated actions, time pressure and low self-control."

This kind of research has significant implications for food manufacturers trying to establish new products with consumers, said panelist Neale Martin, Ph.D., founding partner of Sublime Behavior Marketing and author of *Habit: the 95% of Behavior Marketers Ignore*.

Martin noted that consumers already are habituated to the current products on store shelves, with the average weekly shopping trip taking about 45 minutes and including 31 items.

"Think about the cognitive efficiency of that effort," Martin said. "Think of how many things you're not looking at; how many things you are ignoring."

He believes that is a major reason about 80 percent of new products fail or dramatically underperform, a rate that has been largely unchanged for decades. A new product has to become part of the daily habits of consumers, which is not an easy task.

Martin suggests product developers go beyond the traditional consumer trials and get consumers to absorb the product into their daily life over an extended period of time. They need to find a place in their day where they are willing to disrupt their current habit and adopt a new one with that product.

"Where is the room for another brand in your life? Where is there room for another product? We are overwhelmed by choices," he said. "Figure out the automated behavior and then find out how to disrupt it and get consumers to initiate the behavior you want. You have to get the behavior to occur and then reinforce it by making sure the experience is so fantastic they want it to happen again."

Provided by Institute of Food Technologists

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