

Psychology professor says social validation, meeting expectations among reasons we overeat on Thanksgiving

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Credit: Linnaea Mallette/public domain

Thanksgiving is a time for family, friends and feasting—lots of feasting. So is it any surprise that our eyes always seem to become so much bigger than our stomachs at this time of year?

Not really, according to a Kansas State University [psychological sciences](#)

professor, who says overeating during the holidays has become expected.

For many people, Thanksgiving has become a holiday where the main event is the meal, said Don Saucier, associate professor of psychological sciences. He said that it's not what the meal consists of, but what the meal means to families and traditions everywhere that is important.

Society's vision has shifted from simply gathering together and sharing stories with one another, to gaining social validation through eating, Saucier said. The principle of social validation is when people look to others in a social setting and adapt their own behavior to gain approval in that setting. For Thanksgiving, social validation can be sought and granted through [food](#).

"The way people show their love and care for their family on Thanksgiving is through making their best dish for the Thanksgiving meal," Saucier said. "So for social validation to take place, family members are forced to accept that gesture to make sure the cooks feel validated in their demonstration of affection."

Beyond social validation, Saucier said that people now expect to overeat on Thanksgiving—a day so focused on food, it has adopted its own nickname: Turkey Day.

Saucier said it has become a deeply rooted social behavior among people to eat in groups. There are even gender rules to eating, such as men being expected to eat more and women being expected to eat more healthily.

But gender rules aside, food is a way for people to connect and a way for groups to actively enjoy each other's company, Saucier said.

So how do we stop ourselves from overeating on Thanksgiving?

"People should focus on connecting to the people around them and fulfilling group members' needs for social validation through expressed words instead of focusing on the amounts of food they eat," Saucier said.

By bringing the attention and focus back to the people sharing Thanksgiving together and away from the meal, people can be less tempted to overeat the bounties of food presented to them, Saucier said. Simple social dynamics can be shifted to take away the pressure to overindulge. Becoming knowledgeable as to why people overeat so much, specifically on Thanksgiving, also may help people cut back on how much they put on their plates. Social validation can still come from small portions, Saucier said.

If people are only indulging themselves on one day rather than for the entire holiday season, then they should not worry too much, Saucier said. If a person is not consistently overeating, then it is probably best to simply eat a little less before the meal and a little less after the meal—and enjoy some pumpkin pie.

Provided by Kansas State University

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