

Love the cook: Attraction to comfort food linked to positive social connections

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A big bowl of mashed potatoes. What about spaghetti and meatballs? Sushi? Regardless of what you identify as comfort food, it's likely the attraction to that dish is based on having a good relationship with the person you remember first preparing it, according to the results of a new study by a University at Buffalo research team.

The findings have implications for better understanding how social factors influence our [food preferences](#) and eating behavior.

"Comfort foods are often the foods that our caregivers gave us when we were children. As long as we have a positive association with the person who made that [food](#) then there's a good chance that you will be drawn to that food during times of rejection or isolation," says UB psychologist Shira Gabriel. "It can be understood as straight-up classical conditioning."

Previous research has shown that [comfort food](#) can reduce feelings of rejection and isolation. The latest study published in the journal *Appetite* suggests why certain foods are attractive when we are feeling down.

"Because comfort food has a social function," she says, "it is especially appealing to us when we are feeling lonely or rejected. The current study helps us understand why we might be eating comfort foods even when we're dieting or not particularly hungry," she says.

Comfort food is defined as food that helps people find comfort. For some of the study participants, comfort food was a healthy food choice, for others, it was starchy and fatty.

"For a lot of people it is the food they grew up eating," says Gabriel.

"In a previous study, we gave all of the participants chicken noodle soup," says Gabriel. "But only those who had a social connection to that soup identified it as a comfort food and felt socially accepted after eating it."

This research gives insight into a unique method by which people can feel socially connected and safe - through eating comfort foods. Because a threatened sense of belonging is related to mental and physical health risks, the researchers say it's important to learn how that vulnerability can be managed.

However, this method of filling social needs is not without risks. As

Gabriel says, "Although comfort food will never break your heart, it might destroy your diet."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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