

# Word choice impacts eating disorder sufferers

May 25 2015, by Teresa Belcher



However, participants with high ED scores were quicker at encoding food words into memory, and slower at encoding body-shape words. Credit: Farouq Taj

People affected by eating disorders (ED) are drawn towards food-related information but away from body-shape information.

Researchers at University of Western Australia investigated how memory updating is affected in those with ED when the materials relate to either food or body-shape and whether there was a difference between the two.

Female undergraduates were pre-screened using a questionnaire measuring eating attitudes and behaviours.

This resulted in 89 participants who underwent a memory updating task involving food words (e.g. cream, bacon) or body-shape words (e.g. chubby, thighs) intermixed with neutral words matched on word length and frequency.

In this task, people memorise a set of words and then need to update their memory repeatedly when some words are replaced with new words.

The study was designed to test whether people affected by ED would be quicker or more efficient to encode food words into memory (e.g. when replacing the word 'desk' with the word 'cream'), and slower to encode body-shape words (e.g. when replacing 'yellow' with 'chubby').

The second aim was to test whether people with high ED scores have difficulties disengaging from these ED-relevant words (e.g. slower updating when replacing 'bacon' with 'keyboard').

The first hypothesis was confirmed; the second was not.

## **Study refutes previous research**

School of Psychology senior research fellow Ullrich Ecker says although previous studies indicated that people affected by depression may have difficulties letting go of disease-relevant, negative information, such a pattern was not found in ED.

"We found that people affected by ED took no longer to disengage from food or body words than those not affected."

However, participants with high ED scores were quicker at encoding food words into [memory](#), and slower at encoding body-shape words.

Dr Ecker says food information might be particularly attention-grabbing to a person with an ED-related issue because it has a greater significance attached to it.

But, in contrast body-related [words](#) may be inherently threatening to a person with an ED-related issue, and all people generally show a tendency to avoid processing threatening information.

"This is basic cognitive research, but it could inform theories of eating disorder development, and could thus potentially inform treatment," Dr Ecker says.

"Other researchers in our school are using training procedures to modify such processing biases with very promising results."

**More information:** "Memory updating in sub-clinical eating disorder: differential effects with food and body shape words." *Eat Behav.* 2015 Apr;17:103-6. [DOI: 10.1016/j.eatbeh.2015.01.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2015.01.008)

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