

## Marital distress linked to poor food choices for some, researcher finds

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Lisa Jaremka and collaborators are tracking physiological changes after marital disagreements and have found links between hostility, appetite, diet and body mass.

The arguments were nothing new for the 43 couples who participated in a recent study of how marital stress affects appetite and eating patterns. Hostile exchanges were all too frequent for them, especially when

certain topics came up.

This time, though, the arguments produced new insight for researchers, including Lisa Jaremka, assistant professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Delaware, who has been studying how social stressors affect appetite and diet. She worked with six collaborators at Ohio State University's College of Medicine.

The study, just published by the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*, showed that hostile arguments between married partners often preceded a surge of the "I'm hungry" hormone known as ghrelin, but only among those who were at a healthy weight or overweight (not obese, as defined by the [body mass](#) index).

Hostile arguments also were linked to poor food choices among the same group.

That doesn't mean arguments or hostility caused the hunger or poor dietary choices, Jaremka said, just that there was a correlation – and a fairly strong one.

Hostile couples had significantly higher amounts of the appetite-triggering hormone after arguments if they were at a [healthy weight](#) or in the overweight category, while those who were obese – with BMI 30 or higher – showed no significant difference.

No such correlations were found with leptin, the appetite-suppressing hormone.

The results were consistent, regardless of gender.

The study broke new ground by exploring the body's ability to regulate appetite after an argument with a spouse, and may help researchers

understand how marital difficulties ultimately result in health problems.

It also gave Jaremka the opportunity to test a theory she had during graduate school that rejection and other relational difficulties could make people hungry, perhaps prompting them to seek relief from social isolation through food, usually not healthy food.

"Comfort food," at least in Westernized diets, typically has more fat, sugar and/or salt, she said, all of which can cause [health problems](#).

Knowing whether those factors are part of a person's life could help clinicians develop more effective interventions for weight gain, she said.

"Right now, it's one-size-fits-all – diet and exercise," she said. "I hope this will help us start to tailor interventions. These studies suggest people have difficulty controlling appetite and with specific types of foods.... A personalized approach would be beneficial in the long run."

Participants in this study agreed to attend two sessions, each 9 1/2 hours long, in which they would be with their partner, eat a meal together, try to resolve one or more conflicts in their relationship, respond to questions and agree to blood tests and other data collection.

Typical diets were analyzed and participants were screened for mood disorders and sleep quality. Their age, height and weight were recorded and their body mass was calculated.

Hormone levels were tested at four intervals, once before the meal, and three times after it – at two, four and seven hours after.

One couple did not show up for the second session, Jaremka said, but all others followed through. Many people have an intrinsic interest in relationships, she said, and want to have a better understanding of them,

especially their own.

The study raises many questions for future research. Why are these things – interpersonal tension, appetite, dietary patterns – related? When does this correlation between interpersonal tension and poor diet start? Is there a difference if marital tension is short-lived or chronic? Why is the [appetite](#) of those who are obese relatively unaffected? What happens when similar tests are made in different situations?

Jaremka's research interests have focused on how social experiences affect a person's motivation, physiology and health.

She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at SUNY University at Buffalo and a doctorate in social psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. After working in postdoctoral positions at Ohio State University, she joined the UD faculty last year.

The full study is available online and will be printed in a future issue of the *Clinical Psychological Science* journal.

**More information:** "Novel Links Between Troubled Marriages and Appetite Regulation: Marital Distress, Ghrelin, and Diet Quality." *Clinical Psychological Science* 2167702615593714, first published on July 29, 2015 [DOI: 10.1177/2167702615593714](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702615593714)

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