

Psychological technique helps women who have bulimia

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Researchers from the University of Granada have proven that there are two psychological techniques that help reduce body dissatisfaction and its associated symptoms in women with bulimia nervosa, both of them based on the exposure of their bodies in a mirror.

The researchers' work, published in the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, has revealed that both techniques also reduce salivary cortisol levels, a steroid hormone released in response to stress.

UGR researchers compared two different techniques: guided exposure (in which the participants observe their bodies in the mirror while they describe it in a neutral and objective way, as if an artist should draw them without seeing them), and pure exposure (in which the participants must observe their bodies in the mirror and express the thoughts and feelings this produces).

The research involved the participation of 29 women with high [body dissatisfaction](#) and diagnosis of [bulimia nervosa](#), who were randomly divided into two treatment groups, one for each technique. Each woman received six exposure sessions. Changes in their feelings (both positive and negative) were assessed, as well as their [body satisfaction](#) and changes in salivary cortisol levels.

Effective techniques

The main results show that both exposure techniques reduce negative thoughts in bulimic women and boost positive ones over the course of the treatment, and also reduce cortisol levels. However, pure exposure increases body satisfaction more effectively and reduces to a greater extent the subjective discomfort caused by the sight of one's body during sessions.

These data suggest that pure exposure "could be an effective therapeutic strategy for reducing body dissatisfaction in people with eating disorders and, in a preventive way, in women with high body dissatisfaction levels. Nevertheless, in the future, we should delve into the change mechanisms through which this technique is working," says the lead author of this paper, UGR researcher Sandra Díaz Ferrer.

Body dissatisfaction is one of the main factors responsible for developing eating disorders. "What alerts us the most is that we are facing high body dissatisfaction levels in women of all ages more often. That's why it's important to develop effective techniques for increasing body satisfaction and preventing the appearance of its most feared consequence: the eating disorders".

One of the most studied techniques for improving body satisfaction in recent decades is the exposure to one's body. "The general goal in this kind of technique is to expose people to the image of their own bodies in a mirror big enough to let them systematically examine every inch of their bodies within a time period and to let them learn how to manage negative thoughts and feelings in a more constructive way, without avoiding them," Díaz Ferrer explains.

The results of this work indicate that the use of techniques that allow expression of [negative thoughts](#) and feelings associated with one's body could be more effective than those that guide the patients through neutral descriptions of their bodies.

"With this research, we don't expect women to change their bodies, but to let them be able to accept them and to love them as they are. We should not let mirrors to be enemies in which we can only see what society tells us is beautiful. The mirror should be the mean to reflect the light that every person has, something that ignores fashion or beauty ideals," Ferrar says.

More information: Testing the efficacy of pure versus guided mirror exposure in women with bulimia nervosa: A combination of neuroendocrine and psychological indices. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*

Provided by University of Granada

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