

Research finds social influence can prompt healthier eating choices

July 12 2016

Researchers from the University of Birmingham have found that exposure to social-based messages promoting healthy eating can increase consumption of fruit and vegetables and reduce consumption of high-calorie snacks. It has been known for some time that people adapt their behavior to what they think is socially expected for that situation and food choices are no exception. If we are told that other people in our social group eat lots of fruit and vegetables then we may try to do the same. In the new research to be presented this week at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior (SSIB), the foremost society for research into all aspects of eating and drinking behavior, the researchers found that a "liking social norm" message - information that other people enjoy eating fruits and vegetables - had a particularly powerful effect on food choices.

Student participants were tested in a laboratory and were first asked to rate some posters. One group saw a poster displaying the results of a survey suggesting that the typical student enjoys eating [fruit](#) and [vegetables](#) every day (experimental group) whereas others saw unrelated facts about the University of Birmingham (control group). The participants were then asked to take part in another study that involved rating emotions and tasting some healthy snacks (cucumber and grapes) and high calorie snacks (cookies and chips). The participants who discovered that other students like eating fruit and vegetables ate more of the cucumber and grapes during the taste test, but only if they did not report habitually consuming a lot of fruit and vegetables in their daily diet already. Those who already ate fruit and vegetables daily did not

consume any more cucumber and grapes, however, they ate less of the cookies and chips. Interestingly, most [people](#) were not even aware that the two studies were linked and were not aware that their behavior had been altered by exposure to the message.

According to the authors, these results point towards a new approach to promoting healthier eating. Dr. Jason Thomas said "It might be more effective in terms of health promotion to highlight how much other people enjoy eating fruit and vegetables than to tell people that they should because it is good for them." The team are now interested in finding out more about why social-based message are effective in altering [food choices](#) and whether the strategy can be implemented in realistic settings such as cafeterias and supermarkets.

More information: The effect of a liking norm message on the consumption of fruit, vegetables and energy dense snack foods, Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior (SSIB), 2016.

Provided by Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior

Citation: Research finds social influence can prompt healthier eating choices (2016, July 12) retrieved 4 May 2024 from

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