

Bad break-ups may not trigger weight gain from emotional eating

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That pint of ice cream after a nasty breakup may not do as much damage as you think. Despite the emotional turmoil, people on average do not report gaining weight after a relationship dissolution, according to new

research.

The study, which included researchers from Penn State, were investigating the German concept of "kummerspeck"—excess weight gain due to emotional eating—which literally translates to "grief bacon."

Marissa Harrison, associate professor of psychology at Penn State Harrisburg, said that while hoarding food after a [breakup](#) may have made sense for humans thousands of years ago, [modern humans](#) may have grown out of the habit.

"Food was much scarcer in the ancestral environment, so if your partner abandoned you, it could have made gathering food much harder," Harrison said. "It may have made sense if our ancestors hoarded food after a breakup. But our research showed that while it's possible people may drown their sorrows in ice cream for a day or two, modern humans do not tend to gain weight after a breakup."

According to the researchers, it has been well documented that people sometimes use food as a way to cope with negative feelings and that emotional eating can lead to unhealthy food choices. Because breakups can be stressful and emotional, it could potentially trigger emotional eating.

Additionally, ancient [relationship](#) dynamics may have made packing on the pounds after a breakup evolutionary advantageous.

"Modern women of course have jobs and access to resources now, but back then, it was likely that women were smaller and needed more protection and help with resources," Harrison said. "If their partner left or abandoned them, they would be in trouble. And the same could have gone for men. With food not as plentiful in the ancestral world, it may have made sense for people to gorge to pack on the pounds."

Harrison also noted that the existence of the word "kummerspeck" itself suggested that the phenomenon existed.

The researchers completed two studies to test the theory that people may be more likely to gain weight after a relationship breakup. In the first one, the researchers recruited 581 people to complete an [online survey](#) about whether they had recently gone through a breakup and whether they gained or lost weight within a year of that breakup.

Most of the participants—62.7 percent—reported no weight change. According to Harrison, she and the other researchers were surprised by this result and decided to perform an additional study.

For the second study, the researchers recruited 261 new participants to take a different, more extensive survey than the one used in the first study. The new survey asked whether participants had ever experienced the dissolution of a long-term relationship, and whether they gained or lost weight as a result. The survey also asked about participants' attitudes toward their ex-partner, how committed the relationship was, who initiated the breakup, whether the participants tended to eat emotionally, and how much participants enjoy [food](#) in general.

While all participants reported experiencing a break up at some point in their lives, the majority of participants—65.13 percent—reported no change in [weight](#) after relationship dissolution.

"We were surprised that in both studies, which included large community samples, we found no evidence of kummerspeck," Harrison said. "The only thing we found was in the second study, women who already had a proclivity for emotional eating did [gain weight](#) after a relationship breakup. But it wasn't common."

Harrison added that the results—recently published in the *Journal of the*

Evolutionary Studies Consortium—may have clinical implications.

"It could be helpful information for clinicians or counselors with patients who tend to eat emotionally," Harrison said. "If your client is going through a breakup and already engages in emotional eating, this may be a time where they need some extra support."

More information: Warner, V. L. et al. (2019). Break-Up Kummingspeck? No Evidence for Weight Gain After Romantic Relationship Dissolution. *The Journal of the Evolutionary Studies Consortium* 8(1), 80-96.

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