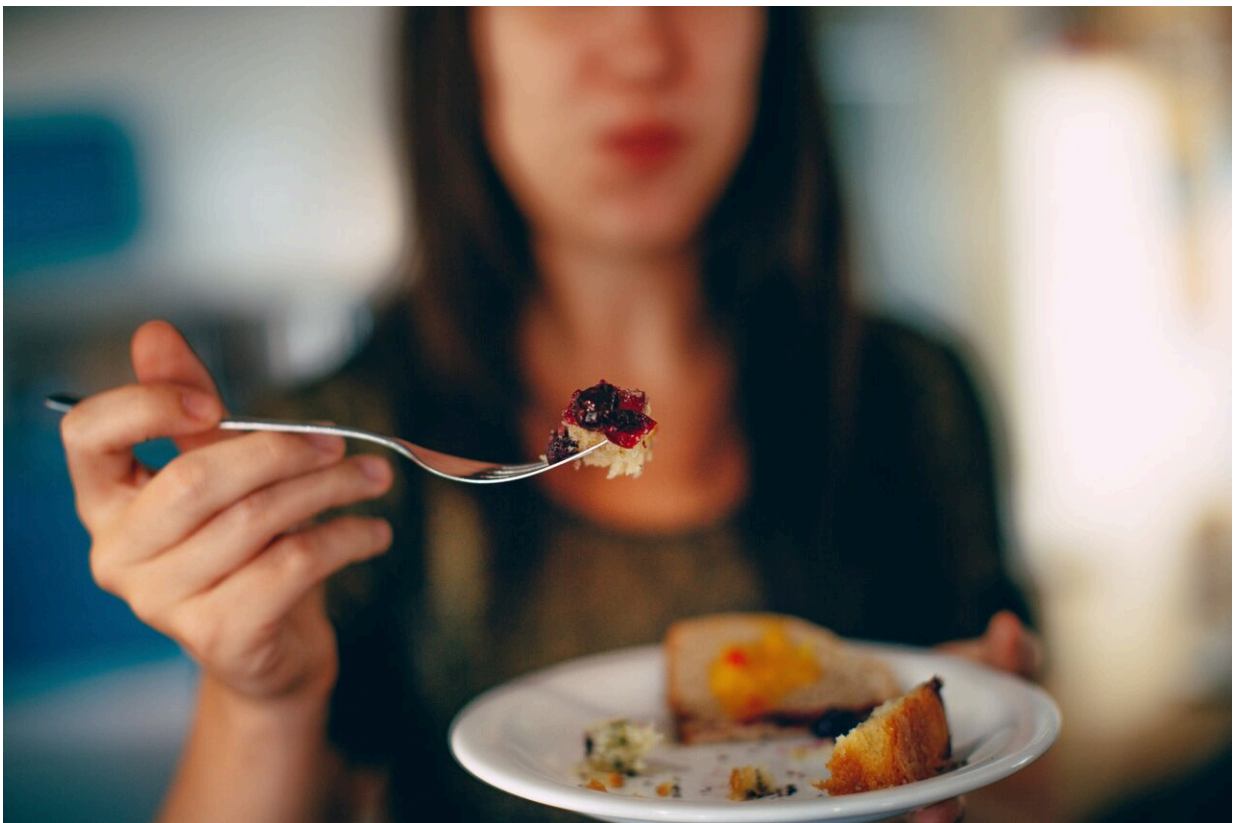


Why do we overindulge? Study explores how distraction affects 'hedonic consumption'

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If you tend to do other things or get distracted while eating dinner, you may be running the risk of over-consuming everyday pleasures later, possibly because the distraction caused you to enjoy yourself less, according to research [published](#) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

The study looked at how distraction affects "hedonic consumption," or buying and using products and experiences because they make us feel good and not necessarily because we need them.

"On any given day, a person may take great pleasure from one or more of these activities, yet people often consume more hedonic goods than they want or than is good for them," said lead author Stephen Lee Murphy, Ph.D., of Ghent University.

One reason for this [overconsumption](#) may be distraction, according to Murphy. When people are distracted while engaged in a hedonic activity, research suggests they are likely to experience less [enjoyment](#) from it than if they were fully focused. That may lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and drive more consumption to compensate for that shortfall.

To better understand the role of distraction in overconsumption, the researchers first conducted an experiment involving 122 participants (mostly female and mostly between the ages of 18 and 24) who reported on how much they expected to enjoy their lunch before eating it. They were then asked to eat their lunch under one of three conditions: no distraction, moderate distraction (watching a video), and high distraction (playing Tetris).

After lunch, participants reported on their actual enjoyment, satisfaction,

desire for further gratification and amount consumed. They also reported on their snacking later in the day.

Participants who ate while distracted reported lower enjoyment and satisfaction, which was associated with increased snacking afterward and a more general desire for further gratification.

The researchers believe that this proposed effect, which they called "hedonic compensation," likely applies to other activities beyond eating. For example, people who are distracted while watching a movie or playing a game may be more likely to engage in additional consumption (e.g., checking [social media](#)) to compensate for a diminished enjoyment of the original activity.

The researchers also followed 220 participants aged 18 to 71 (again mostly female) for a week to investigate this broader effect, beyond food. Participants filled out seven brief surveys per day via their smartphones regarding their hedonic consumption, distraction and satisfaction. As with the food-based experiment, researchers found that when people were distracted during consumption, they were likely to enjoy a product less than they hoped, felt less satisfied, and experienced an elevated need for further gratification.

"Overconsumption often results due to a lack of self-control," said Murphy. "However, our findings suggest overconsumption may also often be driven by the simple human desire to reach a certain level of enjoyment from an activity. When [distraction](#) gets in the way, it's likely we may try to compensate by consuming more."

Murphy and his colleagues plan to conduct further research to replicate and confirm the existence of a hedonic compensation effect. If additional research confirms the effect, they have plans to apply interventions that could help people pay more attention to their

consumption experiences in an effort to lower the likelihood of overconsumption.

"By understanding the key drivers of hedonic overconsumption, we can develop strategies to help prevent its occurrence," said Murphy.

More information: Murphy et al. Underwhelming Pleasures: Toward a Self-Regulatory Account of Hedonic Compensation and Overconsumption, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2024). DOI: [10.1037/pspa0000389](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000389). www.apa.org/pubs/journals/rel.../psp-pspa0000389.pdf

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