

Eating disorders linked with financial difficulties in female students

February 17 2015

Experiencing financial difficulties at university may increase the risk of female students developing an eating disorder, according to new research from the University of Southampton and Solent NHS Trust.

Conversely, the study also found that having extreme attitudes to food and eating predicted short-term financial difficulties for female students, suggesting the possibility of a 'vicious cycle' occurring.

Clinical Psychologist and lead author of the study, Dr Thomas Richardson, says: "There may be a 'vicious cycle' for these students, where [negative attitudes](#) towards eating increase the risk of financial difficulties in the short term, and those difficulties further exacerbate negative eating attitudes in the longer term."

Published online in *The International Journal of Eating Disorders*, the researchers also looked at the relationship between socioeconomic status and eating attitudes. They found a greater persistence of potentially problematic eating attitudes in women from less affluent families.

Over 400 undergraduate students, from universities across the UK, completed surveys assessing family affluence, recent financial difficulties (for example being unable to afford heating or having to borrow money) and attitudes towards food and eating using the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT).

The EAT asks for responses to statements such as 'I feel extremely guilty

after eating', 'I am preoccupied with a desire to be thinner', or 'I have the impulse to vomit after meals'. Higher scores in the test represent extreme attitudes and the potential presence of eating disorders.

Students completed the surveys at up to four times, at intervals of three to four months apart. The key findings are as follows:

- A higher level of financial difficulty in the initial surveys corresponded with more severe attitudes toward food and eating in the third and fourth surveys, after accounting for initial eating attitudes.
- Lower family affluence in the baseline survey was associated with higher scores in the Eating Attitudes Test within the final set of surveys.
- Higher baseline EAT scores predicted increased levels of financial difficulty in the second round of surveys, after accounting for initial financial difficulties.

The results indicated a relationship between financial situation and eating disorders in women, but not in men.

Dr Richardson commented: "It may be that those at higher risk of having an [eating disorder](#) feel like they have no control over events in their life, such as their financial situation, and they may then restrict their eating as a way of exercising control in other areas of their life.

"These links need to be further explored to determine causal mechanisms for the relationship between financial difficulties and eating attitudes."

More information: Richardson, T., Elliott, P., Waller, G. & Bell, L. Longitudinal Relationships between Financial Stress and Eating Disorder Features in Undergraduate Students. *International Journal of Eating*

Disorders [DOI: 10.1002/eat.22392](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.22392) . onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/eat.22392/abstract

Provided by University of Southampton

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