

Mirrors can make unhealthy foods less tasty

17 December 2015

People often choose the unhealthy food because they think it is tastier. Aiming for solutions promoting healthy eating practices and ultimately combating obesity, this research shows that the presence of a mirror in a consumption setting can reduce the perceived tastiness of unhealthy food, which consequently reduces its consumption.

In a taste test study, 185 [undergraduate students](#) chose between a chocolate cake and a fruit salad and then evaluated its taste in a room with a mirror or with no mirrors around. Those who selected the chocolate cake evaluated it less tasty in the room with a mirror compared to those with no mirrors around. However, the presence of a mirror did not change the taste of the fruit salad.

Lead researcher Ata Jami of the University of Central Florida explains, "A glance in the mirror tells people more than just about their [physical appearance](#). It enables them to view themselves objectively and helps them to judge themselves and their behaviors in a same way that they judge others." He found that mirrors can push people to compare and match their behaviors with social standards of correctness. Accordingly, when one fails to follow the standards, he/she does not want to look at a mirror because it enhances the discomfort of the failure. Thus, the presence of a mirror induces a discomfort and lowers the perceived taste of the [unhealthy food](#). This only holds true if the food is selected by the diner because then he/she feels responsible for the food choice. Eating healthy does not induce any discomfort and, as a result, mirror does not change the taste of healthy food.

THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE OF EATING
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We've collected the newest thinking from 30 consumer behavior researchers into the inaugural issue of the Journal of the Association for Consumer Research.

I. HUNGER AND SATIETY

- SKIP DINNER IF YOU'RE NOT HUNGRY:** Spikes in your blood sugar can lead to weight gain.¹
- DON'T CALL IT HEALTHY:** You overeat food called "healthy" because you think it's less filling.²
- MAKE LESS - WASTE LESS:** Low-income families prepare too much food in fear of "running out."³
- MIRRORS + MINDFULNESS:** Kitchen mirrors make you dislike unhealthy food.⁴

II. SHOPPING AND DINING

- HAPPY MEALS CAN BE HEALTHY MEALS:** Brain scans show that small prizes keep you happy when eating less food.⁵
- DISNEY HELPS DIETS:** When juice and fruit came with meals, Disney World goers consumed 11-24% more of them.⁶
- READ CAREFULLY:** Per-serving calorie labels can lead to mindless overeating.⁷
- SLICE SMALLER:** Smaller portions (and bigger tables) lead to smaller meals.⁸
- FOOD PANTRY SOLUTIONS:** Behavioral economics in food pantries lead to healthier shopping.⁹

III. MINDLESSLY EATING BETTER

- USE SMALL PLATES:** You serve 20-25% less when using small plates - but only if a researcher is not watching!¹⁰
- THE LESS FANCY THE PLATE,** the Less You'll Eat. We may eat the least off paper plates.¹¹
- FORKS OVER SPOONS:** Forks (versus spoons) make you overestimate calories.¹²
- AVOID NEGATIVE MESSAGES:** Telling dieters "Don't eat cookies" can double how much they eat. Use 2-sided messages instead.¹³

IV. THE FUTURE OF FOOD RESEARCH

FROM FRINGE TO FOCUS:
 The Behavioral Science of Eating: Encouraging Boundary Research that has Impact.¹⁴
 Boundary Research: Tools and Rules to Impact Emerging Fields.¹⁵

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 FOODPSYCHOLOGY.CORNELL.EDU/JACR

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 The Behavioral Science of Eating

¹ Gal, JACR 2016
² Suher, Raghunathan & Hoyer, JACR 2016
³ Porpino, JACR 2016
⁴ Jami, JACR 2016
⁵ Reimann, MacInnis & Bechara, JACR 2016
⁶ Peters, Beck, Lande, Pan, Cardel, Ayoob & Hill, JACR 2016
⁷ Elshiewy, Jahn & Boztug, JACR 2016
⁸ Davis, Payne & Bui, JACR 2016
⁹ Wilson, JACR 2016
¹⁰ Holden, Zlatevska & Dubelaar, JACR 2016
¹¹ Williamson, Block & Keller, JACR 2016
¹² Szocs & Biswas, JACR 2016
¹³ Pham, Mandel & Morales, JACR 2016
¹⁴ Van Ittersum & Wansink, JACR 2016
¹⁵ Wansink & van Ittersum, JCB 2016

The inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*. Credit: Brian Wansink

This research suggests that placing a [mirror](#) in dining rooms and other eating spaces so that diners can see themselves eat, can be an effective way for individuals and restaurants to encourage healthier eating practices.

This article is published in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* entitled "The Behavioral Science of Eating."

More information: Jami, Ata (2016). Healthy Reflections: The Influence of Mirror Induced Self-Awareness on Taste Perceptions. *The Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*, 1.

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