

Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Eating Patterns: A New Insight into the Antecedents of Eating Disorders?

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the association between emotional intelligence (EI) and emotional eating. The authors hypothesized that EI will negatively associate with emotional eating.

Methods: A correlational study, conducted in a convenience sample. The researchers personally approached working adults in their workplaces. Ninety Israelis, selected to approximate the general working population, filled out EI and emotional eating standard measures, the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale and the Praeger questionnaire. Also gathered were data regarding sex, age, and education. Pearson correlations followed by hierarchical regressions were used to examine the associations between the core measures, controlling for background factors.

Results: Findings supported the hypothesis ($r = .72$; $P < .001$). Controlling for background factors, the partial correlation was $r = .66$ ($P < .001$). Higher scores in the Praeger measure reflect less emotional eating.

Conclusions and implications: The authors propose that the present findings may serve future research as well as practitioners interested in identification of at-risk populations or seeking screening measures for the above issue.

Key Words: emotional eating, emotional intelligence, eating disorders, correlational study (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2010;42:345-348.)

INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders are a growing health threat in most Western cultures. Surveys suggest that a growing portion of the population in various Western countries is preoccupied with their body weight. A growing percentage report emotionally biased eating patterns.¹ Beyond the 3 major diagnoses of anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating, the literature refers to eating disorders not otherwise specified as patterns of dysfunctional behavior related to exaggerated or diminished food consumption posing a threat to health and functioning.^{1,2}

The antecedents of eating disorders have not been thoroughly studied, and science offers only partial insights into what causes eating disorders. Leading risk factors and antecedents include genetic factors related to physiological management of body

fat, hormonal imbalances, and other physiological factors such as viral infections.^{3,4} Psychological factors such as perfectionism and a tendency toward obsessive thought are given much consideration in the literature. The literature also mentions family dynamics and family-related behavioral (such as regular meals or the lack of them) and interaction patterns as pivotal risk factors. Culture is also often targeted as a powerful influence, as it sets standards for what is desirable and appreciated—often in an unrealistic manner.^{2,5}

Emotional eating is a term pertaining to emotion-related eating patterns, independent of actual hunger and usually attributed to a dysfunctional coping strategy in which effective emotional regulation is substituted by eating.^{6,7} Studies have linked emotional eating to a complex combination of genetic, physiological, and emotional

factors, including emotional processing, interactions with family and significant others, and coping strategies.^{3,8,9} At the same time, emotional eating patterns are referred to in the literature as a serious health issue on its own, as well as a first step toward acquiring an eating disorder or as a symptom of having one.^{6,8} Therefore, it is of interest to look at factors related to one's ability to cope with pressures and stress as a potential factor given to both diagnosis and intervention to prevent or reduce the risk of emotional eating and eating disorders.

Emotional Intelligence and Coping with Stress

In the past decade, the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) emerged as a promising factor accounting for a vast range of emotional and interpersonal behavior.¹⁰ Emotional intelligence is a term referring to a group of non-cognitive abilities accounting for how people accommodate and adapt to intra- and interpersonal conditions by identifying emotions, incorporating emotions in thought processes, understanding emotional complexity, and manipulating emotions in self and others.^{11,12} There is

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doi:10.1016/j.jneb.2009.08.009

some evidence associating EI with people's ability to adapt to stressful conditions, ranging from moving to college to maintaining function and avoiding burnout in stressful jobs.^{7,10,12}

Various models and measures of EI have been proposed in the past decade, ranging from simple personality-style self-report tests to ability tests designed to resemble traditional intelligence tests.¹⁰ At this point, there is still no overwhelming evidence to point toward one measure as substantially more valid or less valid than the others, since mixed results are still obtained in most studies, as can be expected from a concept in its infancy.

The Rationale for the Current Study

Emotional eating is, at least in part, influenced or triggered by emotional factors, as mentioned in the literature.^{5,7} Emotional intelligence, on the other hand, is a promising concept that may explain one's ability to process emotions on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Assuming the above, EI may emerge as a significant factor associated with emotional eating.

In this study, the authors examined the possibility of such an association between EI and the tendency toward emotional eating patterns. Since conceptually EI is linked to effective coping with stressors and emotional eating can be viewed as an ineffective coping strategy, the authors hypothesized that EI and emotional eating will be negatively correlated in this sample.

METHODS

Sample

Ninety participants, ranging in age from 21-62 (mean = 42.3, standard deviation = 11.8), agreed to take part in a study about eating habits. The participants included 50 women and 40 men recruited from diverse work settings in Israel, such as employees of a health organization and workers in a social benefits group, a government agency department, and a State University. Though clearly not a representative sample, the purpose was to create a convenience sample approximating as

much as possible the general working population in the state of Israel.¹³

Measures

Emotional eating was assessed by the Praeger questionnaire of emotional eating (Hebrew version).¹⁴ The 16-item questionnaire contains a series of statements regarding food consumption behavior, each answered by "true" or "not true," yielding a score ranging from 0-16 (higher scores indicate *non*-emotional eating). The questionnaire showed adequate internal reliability ranging from Cronbach α .72-.85 in previous studies.¹⁴

Emotional intelligence was assessed by the Hebrew version of the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale.¹⁵ The Hebrew version includes 20 items pertaining to 4 factors: emotion recognition in self and in others, emotional regulation, and the use of emotion. Sample items include: "I am comfortable even when someone around me expresses anger" and "I can say 'I love you' to people." The scale shows adequate internal and test-retest reliability at .88 and .81 (Pearson's r), respectively, and demonstrates evidence for its criterion-related and construct validity.¹⁶

Both measures were chosen for being brief, easy to administer in "real life" conditions, and for showing adequate validity in non-Western cultures.

Demographics including sex (coded as 1 for men and 2 for women), age in years, and education level (ordinal additive values were assigned to various levels of attained education ranging from elementary to Master's degree or above education levels) were also collected separately.

Procedure

Before collecting the data, the authors obtained the approval of the institu-

tional Helsinki committee of the authors' college. Participants were approached personally by one of the authors and were asked to participate in a "survey about eating habits." Participants signed an informed consent form as a part of the survey. They were asked to take the questionnaire forms with them and fill them out in private. The amount of time required to complete the forms as reported by the participants ranged from 8-15 minutes.

Data Analysis

The authors analyzed the data using SPSS (version 16.0, SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, 2007), first comparing the various groups according to the different workplaces from which the authors sampled the participants. Since the authors found no significant differences among the subsamples on the main study variables, they then continued the analyses, treating the whole sample as one. For hypothesis testing, the authors calculated both simple zero-order correlations among the variables and hierarchical regressions to assess the unique contribution of EI to the explained variance in emotional eating. The authors also used analysis of variance models to test for interactions between the study variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the study's focal variables. The data do not suggest floor or ceiling effects, and the distribution of the EI scores is very close to normal, which fits the theoretical expectation.¹⁷ Emotional eating scores also distributed in a relatively symmetrical manner.

To test the hypothesis, the authors first calculated the Pearson correlation between EI and emotional eating, as measured in the present study. The

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Focal Study Variables (n = 90)

Variable	Actual Minimum	Actual Maximum	Mean (SD)	Skewness
EI score	7.00	20.00	14.42 (3.44)	-.29
Emotional eating score	3.00	16.00	9.68 (3.34)	-.21

EI indicates emotional intelligence; SD, standard deviation.

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