

Need States Based on Eating Occasions Experienced by Midlife Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify a comprehensive set of distinct “need states” based on the eating occasions experienced by midlife women.

Design: Series of 7 focus group interviews.

Setting: Meeting room on a university campus.

Participants: A convenience sample of 34 multi-ethnic women (mean age = 46 years).

Phenomenon of Interest: Descriptions of eating occasions by “need states,” specific patterns of needs for the occasion.

Analysis: Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for common themes using qualitative data analysis procedures.

Findings: Eight need states suggested a hypothetical framework reflecting a wide range in emotional gratification. Need states with a low level of emotional gratification were dominated by sets of functional needs, such as coping with stress, balancing intake across occasions, meeting external demands of time and effort, and maintaining a routine. Food was a means for reinforcing family identity, social expression, and celebration in need states with high levels of emotional gratification. Occurrence of need states varied by day and meal/snack occasion, with food type and amount dependent on need state.

Conclusions and Implications: Eating occasions are driven by specific sets of needs ranging from physical/functional to more emotional/social needs. Addressing need states may improve weight intervention programs for midlife women.

Key Words: midlife women, eating occasions, need states, prevention of weight gain

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INTRODUCTION

Overweight and obesity are major risk factors for the development of associated diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease in midlife women.^{1,2} Several studies have documented the tendency for women to gain weight with age or that older women (40-60 years old) weigh more than younger women (20-39 years old).³⁻⁵ Age-related changes in body composition for women include loss of lean mass and gains in weight, fat mass, and central fat deposition.^{6,7} Other challenges to maintaining energy balance for this age

group are decreases in total energy expenditure and basal metabolic rate.^{8,9}

Positive energy balance implicated in the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in midlife adults is dependent in part on physiological changes resulting from aging,⁶⁻⁹ but also on environmental and behavioral factors that influence eating behavior. Environmental changes occurring in midlife that may affect eating patterns include changes in household composition and social context,^{10,11} disposable income,¹² work responsibilities, and time for food preparation.¹³

A social-ecological model may be useful in explaining how eating behaviors of individual women are influenced by multiple socioenvironmental and personal factors.¹⁴ From an ecological perspective, these factors are influential within the situational context of eating occasions at an intrapersonal level (eg, the individual's attitudes, norms, self-efficacy), an interpersonal level (eg, her family, friends, co-workers), and an organizational level (eg, her community). Results from recent studies have identified how socioenvironmental and personal factors impacted eating be-

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havior within eating situations. For example, structure of the day, regularity, and habit were important influences on meal frequency, location, and intake by adults.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ Social setting as an attribute of an eating occasion was described as including the dimension of “presence of others” and social processes such as celebration or bonding.¹⁸ Situational norms for food intake were dependent on the eating situation, with portion size served and social influence often dictating intake.¹⁹ It was suggested that the perception of time scarcity contributes to intake of more convenience products and pre-prepared meals and eating meals in restaurants.²⁰ Emotional triggers of food intake and response to eating situations vary according to individual characteristics.²¹

Market researchers define need states as the inner and outer influences (or triggers) impacting on an individual that result in a purchase or usage decision.²² As applied in the context of this study, need states compose the occasion and all of the internal and external drivers filtered by the individual and perceived as needs surrounding an eating occasion. These drivers may operate at intrapersonal, interpersonal, or organizational levels. A comprehensive approach to understanding eating behavior in the context of needs within eating occasions for midlife women has not previously been used. The purpose of this descriptive research study was to identify a comprehensive set of distinct “need states” based on eating occasions experienced by midlife women. A measurement instrument can be developed based on the set of need states identified to assess relationships between participation in various need states and eating behaviors. These findings can then be used to develop an intervention for midlife women by tailoring strategies to address problematic eating behaviors that are specific to particular need states.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The authors conducted 7 focus groups with 4 to 8 women in each group (N = 43) in evening sessions during June and July 2005 in a meeting room in a university campus building. Inclusion criteria were: (1) female, aged 35-55 years, (2) no chronic medical conditions, (3) no special diet such as vegan or therapeutic diet, (4) not breastfeeding or pregnant, and (5) able to speak and read English. Subjects were recruited from fliers posted at a university in a large, Mid-western metropolitan area. Volunteers were asked to provide information regarding a range of lifestyle, physical, and attitudinal factors including having children under the age of 16 living at home, being employed outside the home, perceived weight status, and concern about health. The authors included all women volunteers according to their availability based on the scheduled meeting dates and times. The women received \$45 for their participation. The university Institutional Review Board approved the use of human subjects in this research study, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

Interview Guide

The focus group interview guide was developed by study investigators with expertise in marketing research and nutrition. Questions were written to first identify common eating situations and then to further explore into the context surrounding the situation. Broad exploratory questions were used to elicit information about attitudes and needs based on influences at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, or organizational levels (Figure 1). Results regarding food attitudes will not be presented here. Participants started by introducing themselves and describing their household make-up. Then they listed and described different types of eating occasions experienced over the past 24 hours in terms of location, meal/snack, type of food consumed, and rationale for choosing the food items consumed. Moderators selected 3 or 4 common occasions and asked more specific questions to further probe the underlying situational and emotional/social needs within each occasion. Moderators wrote notes on a flip chart to summarize needs and benefits and keep participants engaged in the process. Finally, a projective exercise was conducted asking women to generate an analogy relating the occasion to a movie, television show, book, or destination and to explain their choice. Interview sessions took an average of 60 to 90 minutes and were audiotaped. Assistant moderators took notes.

Two moderators conducted the focus groups according to standard focus group procedures.²³ One moderator had previously attended focus group training conducted by R. Krueger,²³ and the other had over 25 years of experience conducting focus groups. Both moderators conducted the first 2 groups together to ensure that procedures for the remaining groups would be consistent.

All transcribed text was first read independently by 3 investigators. Next, investigators met and worked together

Needs within eating occasions

What different types of eating occasions have you had over the past 24 hours?
Probes: Time of day? Day of week? Meal or non-meal? What was eaten? Why did you eat what you did?

Select three common occasions at home and away from home, for each common occasion ask:

1. Who has experienced this type of occasion?
 2. What is going on?
 3. What needs surround the occasion – (Complete the sentence: “I want to....?”)
 4. What types of foods fit the occasion – (Complete the sentence: “I wanted something that...?”)
 5. What types of foods do you eat?
 6. How do you feel about the foods you eat, why?
- Probes: How did the food please you? How did the food disappoint you?

Projective Exercise:

1. If this occasion were a movie/television show/book, what would it be, why?
- If this occasion were a destination, where would it be, why?

Figure 1. Focus group interview guide.

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