

The Association Between Feeling Existentially Isolated and Unhealthy Eating Cognition

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Background

- Unhealthy eating behavior plays a major role in most chronic health conditions, such as obesity, which is a leading cause of early morbidity in the United States (Cutler et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2011).
- Established research illuminates the relationship of social connectedness promoting healthy eating habits, little is known about how a lack of social connectedness (i.e. isolation) can influence eating behavior and food choice differently (Ball et al., 2010).
- Existential isolation is characterized by the feeling that one is alone in their experience of the world, and is associated with heightened loneliness, death through accessibility, depression, anxiety, and reduced self esteem (Pinel et al., 2017).

Objective

- The present research aims to investigate the links between feelings of existential isolation and self-reported eating behavior and healthy eating intentions.

Methods

- Study 1 - 302 Undergraduate Students
 - 233 Women, 64 Men
- Study 2 - 396 Undergraduate Students
 - 324 Women, 69 Men

Procedure

Study #1

- Participants completed self-report measures, assessing feelings of existential isolation with a focus on intentions to eat healthy.

Study #2

- We measured existential isolation, loneliness, and healthy eating behavior through an examination of food quality, calorie content, and portion size planning.

Discussion

Summary and Implications

- Results provide preliminary evidence of an association between feeling existentially isolated and being less motivated to engage in healthy eating behaviors.
- Presents important implications for the role of existential isolation in unhealthy eating, obesity risk, and important health complications

Limitations

- Insufficient sample size and range for comparing men and women's feelings of existential isolation

Future Directions

- Experimentally test whether existential isolation leads individuals to actually engage in unhealthy eating.
- Design an experiment to examine the relationship between feelings of existential isolation in adolescence, childhood obesity, and public policy regarding school lunches.

Results

Study #1

- Existential isolation negatively correlated with healthy eating intentions, $r = -.195, p < .001$, and eating behavior awareness, $r = -.199, p < .001$, suggesting that highly existentially isolated individuals are less concerned with eating healthy foods.

Study #2

- Results indicate that existential isolation is negatively correlated with healthy eating behavior and planning, even while controlling for the effect of interpersonal loneliness. This suggests that highly existentially isolated individuals may be less focused on maintaining a healthy diet.

| | Correlation (r) with Existential Isolation | Correlation (r) While Controlling for Loneliness |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Loneliness | .426*** | - |
| Healthy Eating Behavior | -.310*** | -.222*** |
| Unhealthy Eating Behavior | -.115* | -.131** |
| Food Quality Planning | -.245*** | -.145** |
| Calorie Planning | -.129** | -.134** |
| Portion Size Planning | -.148** | -.161*** |

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

References

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