Exploring Intuitive Eating Behaviors and Attitudes among a Sample of College Students

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Exploring Intuitive Eating Behaviors and Attitudes among a Sample of College Students

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BACKGROUND

Intuitive Eating (IE), a philosophy of eating developed by Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch in 1995, emphasizes attentiveness to the body’s signals in order to meet both physiological and psychological needs. This approach to eating challenges diet culture, with its discourse of control and learned restrictive behaviors, which may contribute to the development of disordered eating behaviors or an eating disorder. Clinically significant eating disorders usually arise between the ages of 18 and 21. According to a 2011 study, eating disorders increased on college campuses from 7.9% to 25% in men, and from 23.4% to 32.6% in women, over a 13-year time span. Current estimates suggest that up to 80% of incoming college freshmen struggle with disordered eating.

PURPOSE & METHODS

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the eating philosophy of college students 18 and over at a public, four-year institution to build upon prior research of IE in this population, and to guide on-campus programming and services. Questions on whether IE behaviors and attitudes would differ between students pursuing health and non-health-related careers were also considered. The Intuitive Eating Scale-2 (IES-2), a validated 23-statement scale regarding hunger and satiety cues, emotional eating, unconditional permission to eat and food selection in relation to body perception, was incorporated into a 33-question Qualtrics survey, along with demographic questions regarding age, gender, race, major, and sport involvement. Participation was solicited through email and consent involved completion of the survey.

RESULTS

A total of 109 usable surveys were collected, with seventy participants identifying as female (64.22%) and thirty-nine as male (35.78%).

By race, eighty-eight individuals identified as Caucasian (80.73%), thirteen as African-American (11.93%), five as Asian (4.59%), one as Hispanic/Latino (0.92%) and two other/preferred not to disclose (1.84%).

Thirty-one participants stated that they were pursuing a health professions-related major (28.44%), with twenty-five of these participants majoring specifically in dietetics (22.9%), while seventy-eight participants were pursuing disciplines outside of health professions (71.56%).

Four participants identified as student athletes (3.67%).

The mean IES-2 score for males was 3.37 (SD = 0.40), while for females it was 3.40 (SD = 0.52).

Thirty-seven females (55.86%) reported that they felt hungrier than men, while only thirty-three men (48.56%) reported the same. The mean score was 3.34 (SD = 0.39).

The mean IES-2 score was 3.39 (SD = 0.48) out of a possible score of 5.

The mean IES-2 score for Caucasians was 3.40 (SD = 0.50), while other races and those that preferred not to disclose, the mean score was 3.34 (SD = 0.39).

The mean IES-2 score of those pursuing a health-related profession was 3.54 (SD = 0.47), while those pursuing other majors had a mean score of 3.33 (SD = 0.45).

DISCUSSION

The mean IES-2 score of 3.39 closely aligns with prior research that utilizes the IES-2 in various sample populations. The closer one’s score is to a rating of 5, suggestively the more of an intuitive eater the individual is. The total IES-2 score in this sample was significantly higher in students pursuing a health-related degree versus those who were not, as well as for students studying dietetics specifically, versus those who were not. IES-2 scores did not differ significantly in this sample by gender, or between Caucasian and Non-Caucasian respondents. Other studies found that there was a moderate degree of difference in IES-2 total scores between men and women, with men often scoring higher and therefore, being recognized as more intuitive eaters.

CONCLUSION

Students pursuing health-related degrees were found to be more intuitive eaters compared to students of other majors. Future research should investigate if this trend holds true in more diverse samples and if IES-2 scores change when IE is incorporated into undergraduate health professions courses. Additionally, future research exploring gender and racial differences in IE behaviors and attitudes are warranted.

References