

Mental Health Difficulties and Abnormal Feeding Regulation during a Crisis: A Mixed-Methods Approach

Authors : Leja Salciute

Abstract : Mental health difficulties are one of the reasons for abnormal feeding behaviour. This is especially evident in a crisis situation. Abnormal feeding behaviour occurs when individuals use food as a method to provide relief for these negative emotions. The study aimed to discover an association between emotional regulation, mental health difficulties and disruption in feeding behaviours in the UK in times of crisis. A mixed-methods design was used. Abnormal feeding behaviour was measured using the Binge Eating Disorder Screener-7, SCOFF scale, Crisis impact scale, Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale and demographics. The sample comprised 342 participants with a history of excessive overeating. The participants (male= 198, female= 141 and other= 3) came from the general population and they were aged 16 and over. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 89. Findings from the survey concluded that difficulties with emotion regulation were found to be associated with abnormal feeding behaviours. Mental health difficulties correlated significantly with changes in individuals' lives, such as work or routines. Individuals differed in their abnormal feeding behaviour in terms of their age, that is, younger individuals showed less struggle with their eating patterns while older individuals faced greater struggles with their abnormal feeding behaviour. Emotion regulation significantly influenced abnormal feeding behaviour. Results from qualitative data suggest four common themes that were identified: demonstration of gratitude, negative emotions, disruptions to social life, and financial loss. For example, participants developed and gained an awareness of being grateful for the simple things in life even when participants experienced hardships. The results also suggested that emotional eating acted like a sedative that allowed the participant to run away from their painful reality. Crisis situation negatively affected relationships among participants and induced negativity related to social interaction. Finally, the respondents highlighted that the presence of uncertainty made it hard to plan ahead and look forward to the future. Although respondents experienced negative emotions and financial losses, some of them still managed to allocate time for themselves and enjoy their time off during crisis. However, majority of respondents referred to their inability to control their external circumstances and turned to and relied upon food overconsumption instead. This had a negative effect on their mental health and presented disruptions in feeding behaviour. It was recommended for individuals in times of crisis to seek psychological support in the form of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

Keywords : binge eating, maladaptive eating behaviours, mental health, negative emotions in crisis

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