



Listening to Obese Children and Adolescents

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BACKGROUND

- Obese children and adolescents are seldom heard and poorly understood.
- Clinicians may intuitively assume that obesity in young people stems mainly from unhealthy eating and inadequate physical activity.
- Yet, what is intuitive may not be true¹.
- If the clinician could understand exactly what is the problem of an obese youth, then the clinician might develop ways to fix it.
- What drives obese youth to overeat, knowing that they do not want to gain weight? Is there a feeling(s) that drives them?
- Listening to the voices of obese children and adolescents may provide the answer.

METHODS

- A four (4) month weight loss study was conducted using a smartphone app (W8Loss2Go) with 35 obese participants (boys: 17; girls: 18), ages 8-20 (mean 13.7, SD 3.0), mean BMI 32.4, mean BMI z-score 2.17.
- The study included weekly 15 minute, recorded phone calls conducted by investigators in which each participant was asked "What drives you to overeat, knowing that you do not want to gain weight? What's the feeling that drives you?"

RESULTS

Investigator: "What drives you to overeat, knowing that you don't want to gain weight? What's the feeling that drives you?"

- **Examples** of participant responses to this question are as follows (click on links to hear audio clips):

• **Age 18, female:** "So what is making me want to eat the food? I think it's just mainly like a boredom, not having anything to do. It's definitely hard for me to think about, because when you're bored you feel alone. I will eat because it'll take my mind off of feeling alone, and I'm afraid not to eat because I don't want to feel alone. If I didn't give in, I don't know what I would do."

• **Age 12, male:** "You know, it's that exploding kind of feeling. Deciding whether to have it or not have it makes the situation more stressful, which could sometimes lead to taking more than I was going to take if I would just take it [to start with]."

• **Age 14, female:** "I'm having trouble with the social eating thing. Whenever my friends come around I get this urge to go out to eat somewhere with them. I end up eating a lot."

• **Age 19, female:** "If I'm having a kind of down day, I go back to food more because it's like a coping mechanism. If I was having a bad day, I could – I would – just eat my way out of the badness, pretty much."

• **Age 20, male:** "I was consumed by consuming, and now look where it's gotten me. I'm way overweight. I always felt like I was in control. I was just making the decision to do it. But in reality I was doing it because it was like an **addiction** almost; like I had to."

• **Age 14, female:** "And like, 'Oh, I'll run,' or, 'I'll go walking later,' and eat an extra slice of cake. Delaying losing weight is a better option than, like, not having another bite of something, like you can do something later to make up for it, even though that's not really how it works."

• **Age 14, male:** "My biggest trigger is when the food is right there in front of me... my friends they'd be eating something and say, 'Oh, you want some?' And then I just wouldn't be able to say no. All thoughts of losing weight... my brain just like pushes them aside. What drives me? I just really like the way food tastes. Feels good, tastes good, makes me happy. After I eat, I feel horrible afterwards."

• **Age 17, female:** "Well, yeah, I do it out of comfort. It tastes good, so it'll cheer me up. "

• **Age 13, female:** "So Wednesday when my cat died, like, we kind of just went and got ice cream."

• **Age 12, female:** "We went to the dollar store, and when we get there, there's a big load of candy right in front of me... like, right when you walk in the store. And it's like, 'Oh, my God... like, you need it!' God, it's super hard!"

• **Age 19, male:** "Having that brain hunger, and thinking that I need to eat, so then I snack. My brain is telling me I'm stressed out and I need to eat to de-stress me. The only way you can really get the thought out of your mind is by eating."

• **Age 12, male:** "Like, it would feel like I'm missing out on something."

• **Age 17, female:** "Disappointment of missing out on eating. If the disappointment continued I'd probably find something else to eat later, making up for what was lost."

• **Age 12, female:** "Like at a party, someone else is going to eat it, like oh my god I could be eating that now, enjoying that piece of chip."

- **In summary**, feelings that drove participants to overeat, in order of prevalence, included: boredom, pleasure seeking, stress, conflict to eat or not eat, sadness, social pressure, trigger of food in sight, feelings of missing out, addiction, and repetitive thoughts of food that they could not shake.

DISCUSSION

- Although qualitative, the candid voices of obese young people are rich with information.
- If clinicians would listen to their obese young clients and ask the right questions, it may become evident that what drives these youth to overeat is a psychological problem, suggestive of an addictive process.
- If disordered **undereating** is considered an eating disorder, why isn't disordered **overeating** considered an eating disorder?
- Shouldn't obesity be treated by psychologists/psychiatrists??

CONCLUSIONS

- Disordered overeating and obesity in youth appears to be a psychological problem, suggestive of an addictive process.
- Disordered overeating and obesity should be considered an eating disorder and treated by psychologists/psychiatrists.

REFERENCES

1. Wilkin, T., poster at *Euro Congr on Obesity*, Lyon, France, 2014.
2. Chwastiak, L. and Cenk, T., *World Psyc.* (2014), 13(2): 193–195.
3. Poster and audio clips at: <http://weigh2rock.com/clips>