



The Frequency of Disordered Eating Behaviors and Eating-Related Functional Impairment

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INTRODUCTION

The frequency of disordered eating behaviors is often used as a marker of the severity of eating psychopathology and comprises a major portion of eating disorder diagnosis.

PURPOSE

This study sought to determine at what frequency binge eating, purging, and fasting are associated with clinically significant impairment.

METHODS

Participants

The sample included 293 undergraduates (56% women) and 100 individuals with clinically significant eating disorders (82% women) recruited via the Internet from around the United States and diagnosed with the following:

- 16% ($n=16$) anorexia nervosa spectrum
- 49% ($n=49$) bulimia nervosa spectrum
- 25% ($n=25$) binge eating disorder spectrum
- 10% ($n=10$) purging disorder spectrum

Measures

Participants completed a new questionnaire that assesses the frequency of binge eating, purging, and fasting behaviors over the past 12 weeks (the last 4 of which were used in this study) and the Clinical Impairment Assessment (CIA), a self-report questionnaire of functional impairment resulting from disordered eating behaviors over the past 4 weeks.

Data Analysis

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the point of intercept with the established cutoff of the CIA in the sample of undergraduates alone and combined with the community sample of individuals with eating disorders.

RESULTS

The frequency of binge eating, purging, and fasting were all positively and significantly associated with impairment. Table 1 displays the frequency at which these behaviors crossed the CIA clinically significant cutoff of 16.

Undergraduate Sample

Of the 15 individuals reporting purging, 40% scored above the cutoff of the CIA. Of the 63 individuals reporting binge eating, 43% scored above the cutoff. Finally, 41% of the 37 individuals reporting fasting scored above the cutoff.

Community Eating Disorder Sample

Of the 55 individuals reporting purging, 87% scored above the cutoff of the CIA. Of the 73 individuals reporting binge eating, 88% scored above the cutoff. Finally, 92% of the 53 individuals reporting fasting scored above the cutoff.

Table 1. Approximate Frequency of Behavior at CIA Cutoff of 16				
	<i>Undergrad Sample Only</i>		<i>Combined Sample</i>	
<i>Behavior</i>	Days/Week	95% Conf. Interval	Days/Week	95% Conf. Interval
Fasting	2.14	1.16 - 5.75	0.93	0.54 - 1.51
Binge Eating	2.63	1.81 - 4.06	1.54	1.03 - 2.28
Purging	1.16	0.61 - 3.74	0.95	0.58 - 1.47

CONCLUSIONS

It is common in an undergraduate population to engage in disordered eating behavior, especially binge eating and fasting, in the absence of clinically significant impairment. However, restriction of range in clinical variables may be present in non-clinical samples, potentially influencing the ability to uncover stable associations involving these variables. Using frequency cutoffs for diagnosis and outcome necessitates demonstrating that these cut-points are meaningful and associated with clinically relevant variables, including functional impairment.

