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Letter to the editor

Emotional eating in times of coronavirus disease 2019



Dear Editor,

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2, has become a pandemic that affects the entire world. One of the first actions taken to prevent the virus' spread was to socially separate people. The World Health Organization defined various measures of social distancing, including closing educational institutions and industries, and prohibiting long-distance travel and social gatherings [1]. Because of these measures, more people were obligated to be isolated at home, increasing their chances of developing preexisting mental problems, such as emotional eating disorders [2]. People without preexisting eating disorders, under certain circumstances, for instance, the current situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, have an increased risk of developing these problems [3].

As part of the mental disorders group, emotional eating is connected to biological, psychological, and social factors [4], along with problems of maladaptive attitudes, cognition, and behaviors correlated to negative physiological and mental health events [5]. A pandemic is the perfect environment in which this kind of problem might develop or grow worse.

Food consumption is not only a physiological need, other factors (e.g., hunger, appetite, cost, availability of food, cultural factors, and emotions) are also strongly associated with food habits [6]. In addition to these, gut hormones, especially ghrelin, also play important roles in regulating food intake [7] and, in turn, may have an impact on emotional eating due to the situation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Emotional eating is mainly related to the consumption of sweets and food with a high amount of fat. This consumption is caused by emotional stress, which represents a way of handling negative emotions and, consequently, these emotions can act as a continuous trigger, increasing the consumption of these types of food [6]. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused different types of psychiatric damage, such as loneliness, anxiety, insomnia, depression, panic, and exhaustion, as reported in some studies [8,9]. Therefore, emotional eating can be induced by different reasons correlated with COVID-19, such as daily news reports of new cases and mortality growth [10], preoccupation regarding the health of their own family [11], media coverage of food safety and food shortage concerns, and home-based challenges that can aggravate eating disorder behaviors [12].

People can feel connected to different things. These connections are developed through the association between things they like, trust, identify with, or care for, and these associations can be positive or negative [13]. People use food to cope with some situations. According to a recent study by Barnhart et al. [5], difficulties in regulating emotions enhance the relationship

between negative emotional eating and other forms of disordered eating.

In this time of uncertainty, people are struggling with their emotions, which is reflected on what they eat, impacting their health and well-being, creating adverse effects not yet known, which will need to be accommodated by doctors and health care systems [14]. In a world where disorders related to food consumption exist, our society needs to raise awareness and take measures to improve health conditions while combating the pandemic. There is a necessity to create strategies to fight the spread of other pandemic-related disorders, otherwise, the world will be dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic's side effects for a long time. This gap cannot be left open, or disorders that the population is already suffering from will worsen.

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