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The purpose of this study is to examine whether self-esteem and resilience are associated with unhealthy eating behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Unhealthy eating behaviors occur for various reasons, most notably by perceiving external cues of food, but also from excessive stress (Izydorczyk et al., 2019).

Research suggests that people cope by either overeating (Ljubičić et al. 2023) or undereating (Celik et al., 2023) in response to stress.

Self-esteem has been shown to play a role in improving healthy eating habits, particularly in youth. (Tolvanen et al., 2023).

To our knowledge, no study has examined whether resilience, defined as an ability to positively cope with stress, is associated associated with healthy eating habits during stressful events.

METHODS

Participants: College students (N = 183; M = 20.02 years) were solicited from a small private university in South Florida.

Materials and Procedure: As part of a larger study, participants filled out a survey created using Qualtrics Online Survey Platform:

- **Emotional Eating** (AEBQ; 8 items)
 - "I eat more when I'm annoyed."
- **Resilience** (BRS; 6-items)
 - "I usually come through difficult times with little trouble."
- **Self-Esteem:** (BRSES; 5-items)
 - "I feel that I have a number of good qualities."



Resilience is inversely associated with emotional undereating, but not overeating.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between All Measures

	Emotional Overeating	Emotional Undereating	Resilience
Emotional Overeating (M = 2.43, SD = 1.15)	--		
Emotional Undereating (M = 3.26, SD = 1.13)	-.34***	--	
Resilience (M = 3.39, SD = 0.90)	-.05	-.26***	--
Self-esteem (M = 3.80, SD = 0.87)	-.03	-.20**	.55***

* p < .05. ** p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Emotional Overeating and Emotional Undereating.

Predictor	Emotional Overeating		Emotional Undereating	
	ΔR ²	β	ΔR ²	β
Resilience		-.05		-.21**
Self-Esteem		-.01		-.08
Total R ²	.00		.07**	

* p < .05. ** p < .01.

RESULTS

Correlation analysis suggests that there is an inverse correlation between emotional undereating and resilience (r = -.26, p < .001) and self-esteem (r = -.20, p < .01).

- This effect is not seen with emotional overeating with resilience (r = -.05, p = .49) and self-esteem (r = -.03, p = .65).

To examine whether resilience or self-esteem provide unique contributions to emotional undereating, a multiple regression analysis was conducted.

- Results suggest that resilience (β = -.21, p = .01) predicts emotional undereating above and beyond that of one's self-esteem (β = -.21, p = .01), which is no longer a significant predictor or emotional undereating.

Neither resilience or self-esteem contribute to emotional overeating.

DISCUSSION

Emotional undereating might be a less common form of unhealthy eating behaviors, but it can lead to the development of eating disorders like anorexia (Geliebter & Aversa, 2003)

Therapeutic techniques focused on developing resilience could help buffer the negative effects of emotional undereating.

Future researchers should control for participant weight.

- Overweight and underweight individuals cope differently with stressful situation. (Geliebter & Aversa, 2003).

Researchers could examine whether nutritional education programs influence unhealthy emotional eating.

Gender differences in these effects were not examined in this study.

- Future researchers should attempt to parse out how gender and gender norms/expectations influence emotional eating.