Adolescent Dating and Bulimic Symptoms: The Role of Previous Sexual Experience

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INTRODUCTION

- Adolescent dating has been linked with increased symptoms of bulimia (Ruuksa et al., 2003), but this link is poorly understood.
- Few studies have examined whether sexual experience plays a role in the association between dating and bulimic symptoms. One study has shown that girls who are involved in a nonsexual (but not a sexual) dating relationship report increased dieting over time (Halpern et al., 2005). However, this study did not examine bulimic symptoms or previous sexual experience.
- Because girls who are dating often feel pressured to engage in sexual intercourse (Skinner et al., 2008), a lack of sexual experience within dating relationships may be associated with increased self-consciousness and weight concern, thus predisposing youth to bulimic symptoms.

PURPOSE

- To investigate whether or not there is an interaction between sexual experience and dating on bulimic symptoms. We hypothesized that, compared to girls who are not dating or who are sexually experienced and currently dating, girls who are sexually inexperienced and currently dating would report the greatest symptoms of bulimia.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS (N=74)

- Participants were recruited as part of a larger study on eating disorders (Zaitsoff, 2008). Participants were 74 females aged 12 to 19 years (M = 15.35, SD = 1.75). Twenty-five were diagnosed with an eating disorder (17 with symptoms of anorexia and 8 with symptoms of bulimia), 25 were diagnosed with a depressive disorder, and 24 reported no psychiatric history.

MEASURES

- Bulimic Symptoms
  - Eating Disorders Inventory-2 (Gardner, 1991)
- Current Dating Involvement (Kuttler & La Greca, 2004)
- Not Dating now
- Currently dating one or more people casually
- Currently involved in a serious dating relationship
- Sexual Experience
  - “Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse?” (Yes/No)

RESULTS

- Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Variables</th>
<th>ED (n=25)</th>
<th>DD (n=25)</th>
<th>Control (n=24)</th>
<th>Total (N=74)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Dating*</td>
<td>Not dating</td>
<td>13 (52%)</td>
<td>11 (44%)</td>
<td>16 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dating Casually</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>12 (48%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dating Seriously</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Experience*</td>
<td>Inexperienced</td>
<td>10 (40%)</td>
<td>13 (52%)</td>
<td>6 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>15 (60%)</td>
<td>12 (48%)</td>
<td>18 (75%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Chi-square was not significant (χ²(4, n=74) = 7.63, p > .05).
* Chi-square was not significant (χ²(2, n=74) = 3.76, p > .05).

REFERENCES


DISCUSSION

- These results provide insight into the link between dating and bulimic symptoms. Our findings suggest that, among adolescent girls who are involved in a serious romantic relationship, a lack of sexual experience may be a risk factor for clinically significant bulimic symptoms.
- This finding is inconsistent with previous studies showing that sexual activity and bulimic symptoms are positively correlated (e.g., Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2001). However, it is consistent with recent findings indicating that when studying adolescent dating, it is important to consider the sexual context within which dating relationships occur (Halpern et al., 2005; Grello et al., 2003).
- A limitation of this study is small sample size. However, this study was among the first to examine the role of sexual experience in the association between dating and bulimic symptoms.