Changes in Eating Habits Among Eating Competent and Non-Eating Competent College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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OBJECTIVES

Eating Competence is associated with higher dietary quality and lower psychological distress, but it has not been studied qualitatively. This qualitative study had two aims:

1) to describe eating-related behavior changes reported by U.S. undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic;
2) to describe behavior changes among students who were and were not Eating Competent (EC).
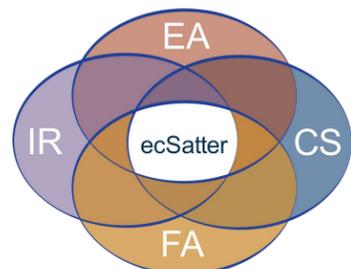
METHODS

Participants:
- Undergraduate students, ≥ 18 years old, able to read and understand English

Data collection:
- Online survey, October - December 2020
- Previously validated Satter Eating Competence Inventory (esSI 2.0™)

Qualitative analysis:
- Direct content analysis with deductive categories (four domains of EC) and inductive sub-codes

Satter Eating Competence Model (ecSatter). First validated in Lohse B, Satter E, et al. *J Nutr Educ Behav* 2007.

RESULTS

A total of 1,529 responses were analyzed.

- Age: 20.2 ± 3.7 years old
- Female gender: 71.0% (n=1,079)
- Transgender, nonbinary, queer, or other gender identity: 4.1% (n=62)
- Eating Competent: 40.0% (n=611)

Changes reported by respondents include the following, organized by EC domain:

Contextual skills (n=499)
- Timing or number of meals changed due to altered schedule, change in sleep pattern, lack of structure
- Eating at home more often
- Increased snacking
- More cooking, as a positive change influencing dietary quality

Internal Regulation (n=221)
- Eating with increased awareness and/or attention
- Increased concerns about weight, either weight loss or gain
- Decreased appetite, often related to decreased activity

Eating attitudes (n=95)
- Increased disordered eating and binging behaviors, with some reports of working to address or resolve these behaviors
- Fluctuating between disordered and non-disordered eating, or binging and restricting at different time points in the pandemic

RESULTS CONT

Food acceptance (n=83)
- Initiating a diet or following a different dietary pattern (e.g. vegetarian, pescatarian, vegan) since the start of the pandemic

Contextual Skills

EC: "My meal times have changed and become more flexible because I am home so much and don't have to eat at any specific times." - #702

Not EC: "I think I've been eating less, which is a bad thing for me. If I don't have a structured eating routine, I end up not eating as much because I don't get hungry[...]" - #1383

Food Acceptance

EC: "I have tried more foods and eaten at home more than I normally would." - #229

Not EC: "I monitor my calories very closely and have become vegan" - #75

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, both EC and non-EC students reported similar types of changes, but students in each subset often discussed these changes in different ways. Further research is needed to understand whether being Eating Competent may increase resilience during high-stress challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eating Attitudes

EC: "At first, I was scared to be home so much and have access to the pantry whenever. Now, I've discovered that I actually feel more comfortable around food[...] I don't look or count calories like I obsessively had in the past[...]" - #1706

Not EC: "More disordered being alone more often[...] TikTok really fuels disordered eating." - #1984

Internal Regulation

EC: "Trying to only eat until I feel satisfied since I am not as physically active as I used to be." - #1086

Not EC: "I became more aware of my eating and with more time on my hands I became fixated on weight and body image." - #1835