The Connection Between Stress and Comfort Food

by JESSICA

Comfort Foods May Be Highly Preferred by Those Exposed to Stress Early in Life

The Society for the Study of Ingestive Behavior (SSIB) has presented research that suggests that exposure to stress, in the first few days after birth, can cause a person to consume more comfort foods as a way of controlling anxiety and stress when he or she approaches adulthood. Emotional stress leads to the consumption of comfort foods. This, in turn, contributes to the development of obesity among those affected. In addition, women are more affected by these adult hormonal responses, which are related to chronic stress. Let's take a look at the connections between stress and comfort food.

This study aimed to verify if this statement of stress exposure and comfort food indulgence in adulthood was true. Rat subjects were used and the stress factor was induced by reduced nesting material. The stress response of these rats, as adults, was then measured. Behavioral anxiety was measured through a computerized system.

What the Study Involved

The study involved the offering of only regular chow to the rats and also giving them the choice between a regular diet and the palatable diet, which is another word for comfort foods. A computerized system known as BioDAQ Research Diets (®) was used to monitor the response of these rats over 30 days. Two groups of rats were involved. One was the early-life stress group and the other was the standard care group, which was the control group. The early-life stress group had been exposed to less litter from the 2nd to the 9th day of their birth. The rats in the control group, even after being exposed to the palatable diet, did not eat much of it. However, their counterpart's main preference was the palatable diet of comfort foods.

Chronic exposure to this type of food did not serve to reduce the hormonal response of these rats to further induced stress. Adulthood anxiety and hormonal response were still greatly increased in these cases. Tania Machado, the lead researcher, said that this was the first such study ever conducted to show that early stress can lead to an increase in the preference for comfort foods later on in life as adults. The altered food habits in these stress-exposed rats can be seen to be a direct result of their early life exposure to a stress-related environment. This can be described as self-medication among the rats. Food was used to gain comfort to help them deal with the effects of the stress that they were feeling as adults.

This study can further be useful in producing certain implications of cases where children have a history of neonatal adversity and also with babies who were born with lower birth weights. In human beings, as well as in rats, adults who experience neonatal stress are more likely to resort to the consumption of comfort foods to deal with the circumstances.