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#eating disorders

#binge eating

#attention bias modification

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## Binge Eaters Pay Attention

It's well-documented that roughly two-thirds of American adults are either overweight or obese (the former is defined by a [Body Mass Index](#) of 25.0-29.9, the latter by 30.0 or higher).

Somewhere between one-fifth and half of overweight adults, according to studies, engage in binge eating, i.e. consuming large amounts of food within discrete, typically short, periods of time. Not surprisingly perhaps, the behavior is associated with a higher risk of psychiatric problems.

Current weight loss programs often employ [cognitive behavioral treatment](#) (CBT) or [interpersonal treatment](#) (IPT) to deal with binge eating. CBT emphasizes improving the maladaptive thoughts surrounding eating, body shape or weight so that healthy weight control behaviors can flourish. IPT addresses interpersonal problems that often accompany and may sustain the symptoms of [binge eating disorder](#). These treatments produce remission rates of 40 to 60 percent, but generally fail to produce significant weight loss.

[In a new paper](#) published in the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, researchers at UC San Diego School of Medicine and San Diego State University (SDSU) suggest a different approach, one that focuses upon altering attention biases that lead to overeating.

Attention bias describes a person's tendency to repeatedly think or fixate on a topic or aspect of life. For example, if you think about chocolate a lot, odds are

you probably eat a lot of it too. Calorically-dense foods like chocolate capture attention much more easily than, say, celery.

For their study, first author [Kerri Boutelle, PhD](#), professor of clinical pediatrics at UC San Diego School of Medicine, senior author Nader Amir, PhD, professor of psychiatry at SDSU, and colleagues investigated whether an attention bias modification (ABM) program, used in other areas of psychopathology, might improve outcomes in people who binge eat.

Fifteen participants who binge eat and who were overweight or obese were enrolled in an 8-week attention bias modification program that consisted of weekly lab sessions and two training sessions at home. Nine completed the program; eight completed an assessment three months after treatment.

Boutelle and colleagues found the ABM participants decreased their binge eating and lost weight – an average of 4.5 pounds over the eight weeks. If the rate of weight loss continued for a year, it would surpass typical results of programs using CBT or IPT. Of particular note: the ABM program did not have diet or physical activity components. It focused only upon changing attention bias to food.

There were study limitations: The sample size was small and all female, with significant drop-out. There was no control group. Participants understood the purpose of the study, which can skew findings. Nonetheless, the results were notable and encouraging, said the study authors, suggesting attention bias may play a fundamental role in binge eating and sustained weight loss – and thus worthy of further, fuller investigation.

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