



ResearchLink

Women's Weight and Emotions: The Impact on Relationships and Eating Behaviors



A new study shows that overweight women may hide negative emotions from male partners in order to please them; doing so may have both rewards and costs. When heavier women hide their emotions, their partners report fewer bad feelings toward them; but to cope with unexpressed negativity, the women may then overeat.

The reverse is true for thinner women who hide their emotions: their partners report having more bad feelings toward them; but these women do not overeat.

How Are Weight, Hiding Emotions, and Relationships Related?

Research studies have shown that overweight women, especially those with diagnosed eating disorders, tend to cope with negative emotions by suppressing them. "Suppression" here refers to keeping one's bad feelings, such as anger, hurt, or fear, to oneself. Many people believe that overweight women suppress bad feelings more than normal weight women because they have lower social status. A key reason is that heavier women tend to be disrespected for failing to meet society's "thin ideal." Because they may fear social rejection, these women may try to protect their relationships by hiding emotions that can lead to conflict with their partners.

In general, in Western countries, hiding one's feelings has been shown to have a negative impact on relationships.

- 1 Hiding feelings can lower the amount of support one gets from friends, most likely because they do not know you need support.
- 2 People who do not show their feelings seem to be less likeable than others.
- 3 Hiding feelings may reduce closeness and connection with a romantic partner.

Some researchers, though, believe that emotion suppression may help overweight women, especially if they experience a lot of intense negative feelings. For example, one study showed that heavier women said they hid their negative emotions in order to please their husbands. By hiding their feelings, these women believed they could prevent negativity from overwhelming and, in turn, harming the relationship. But whether this suppression had any effect on the husbands or on the women's eating behavior was not clear.

In addition, hiding one's feelings has a negative impact on emotional eating. Emotional eating refers to the common behavior among people of eating to lessen one's experience of negative emotions. For people who are dieting, hiding one's emotions can create pressure inside; this pressure can overwhelm their capacity to apply will-power, which leads to a break down in dieting efforts. Also, hiding intense bad feelings does not naturally increase one's positive feeling; nor does it reduce one's negative experience. The negative feelings often still remain. In that case, a person who tends toward emotional eating would be at risk.

Why? They have not found a way to improve their emotional state, which may have gotten worse. Overweight women may be particularly



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at risk for eating that is related to negative feelings. Further, the more they try to control their emotions, the more at risk they are of overeating.

About the Study

A recent study sought to better understand the impact of emotion suppression on the romantic relationships and eating behaviors of overweight women. The researchers asked three questions:

- 1 Do heavier women (women with a higher body-mass index, or BMI) report higher levels of emotion suppression in a one-week period than women with a lower BMI?
- 2 Does hiding emotion have a good effect on their partner's feelings about them?
- 3 Is emotion suppression related to increased eating for women, especially heavier women?



To answer these questions, 91 male/female couples were recruited. They ranged in age from 18.5 to 68.5 years, just over half were married, 36.8% had children, and their relationships ranged from three months to 45 years. Participants first filled out an online survey that asked them for their current weight and height. Then each day for 7 consecutive days, they filled out a daily diary about the following items:

- the degree to which they kept their emotions to themselves

- the extent to which they experienced positive or negative feelings toward their partner
- whether they had eaten more, less, or about the same amount as they usually do

Finally, the researchers used a multi-level dyadic model to answer their questions (see Text Box 1).



Text Box 1: A Multi-Level Dyadic Model

The researchers used a model that looked at how each partner's emotions and emotion suppression affected each other day by day. In other words, the model captured what was going on inside each person as well as what was happening between the couple during the week.

Another important point is that the model looked at the day-to-day link between a person's emotion suppression and his or her eating behavior, as opposed to their average level of eating.

- For example, suppose a woman tends to be angrier compared to most women. The model does not simply ask: Does that woman eat more compared to most women? The model asks: If the woman is angrier today than yesterday, does she eat more today than she usually does?
- How are the two questions different? Imagine an eating range of 1 to 10. Suppose most women eat "5" per day. Let's say this woman eats "8" per day. Now imagine that on a day that she got very angry at her husband, she ate "10." The model allows the researchers to measure both questions—whether she eats more than most women, and whether she eats more on days that she is angrier.

Finding 1

Women with high BMI did not suppress emotion more than other women. Regardless of their weight, women tended to suppress emotions at the same level.

- This finding does not support the question asked by the researchers. One reason may be that they did not assess whether participants had eating disorders; they only asked about weight status. It may be that emotion suppression is more related to eating disorders than weight status.

Finding 2

On days when women with high BMI suppressed emotion more, their male partners had fewer negative feelings about them. In contrast, when women with low to normal BMI suppressed emotion, their male partners had more negative feelings about them.

- This finding suggests that obese and normal-weight women may experience different relationship outcomes when they hide their emotions. Hiding emotions may have a gradual long-term impact on the quality of the relationship. In other words, having your partner feel a little negative about you on a given day is not that much of a problem. But if your partner has a little negativity toward you on a regular basis, it is likely to wear down the relationship.

Finding 3

On days when overweight and obese women suppressed their emotions more, they reported increased eating. This was not true for women with lower BMI, whose eating behavior did not change on days they suppressed emotions more.

- This finding indirectly suggests that heavier women may find it harder to cope with bad feelings than thinner women and overeat to soothe themselves.

Findings for Men

Each question was also studied for the men, but no effects of emotion suppression were found on men's relationships or eating behaviors.

- One reason may be that men were found to suppress emotions on a daily basis more than women did. They

may be less aware of doing so and, in turn, less able to report on their emotion suppression on a given day. Most research shows that men suppress emotion more than women, likely due to cultural norms that discourage men from expressing too much emotion. Therefore, hiding emotions may seem more normal to men and so may impact their daily lives less.

A Double-Bind for Overweight Women

Are overweight and obese women caught in a double-bind? Do they risk overeating when they try to please their male partners by suppressing their emotions?

The findings from the study suggest that this scenario may indeed be true for some women. On days that heavier women hid their negative feelings more, their partners reported having fewer negative emotions about them. On those same days, the women reported eating more than usual. The reverse was true for thinner women; when these women suppressed their emotions, their male partners were not as happy with them. But these women did not increase their eating.

Two important things to consider:

- The reward to relationships of hiding emotions may be high in the short-term for heavier women but low for thinner women. The finding about thinner women is consistent with other research in Western countries: hiding emotions can hurt relationships. Yet the result about heavier women is new. Why might the relationships of heavier women benefit from the women's emotion suppression? Perhaps hiding emotions plays a very different role in the costs and rewards to relationships for women of different weights. That is, whatever is going on interpersonally between the woman and her male partner may differ depending on her weight.
- Daily increased eating for heavier women was small, but their overeating behaviors reflect daily internal processes that occur in the context of real life. As such, the overeating could lead to gradual weight gain over the long run.

Implications

- The reasons why relationships of heavier women seem to benefit more from the women's research needs to look at whether women of different weights are hiding different emotions. Studies also need to bear in mind the processes within relationships that may explain how emotion suppression, relationship quality, and eating behaviors work together. These processes may include differences in power due to stigma about weight and in skills to reduce conflict.
- Practitioners working with overweight women might teach them skills to cope with their emotions in open ways; they might also help them learn better ways to manage conflict. Those who work with children should start early to help them develop healthy eating habits and ways to cope with bad feelings.
- Health professionals should work to reduce stigma against overweight individuals. They can work with media to sponsor messages that question society's thin ideal and promote more acceptance of different body types.



“The finding that overweight women may be rewarded for hiding their emotions is noteworthy because it differs from previous studies. Most people assume that when you hide your emotions, your relationships don’t do as well. But for some heavier women, the reverse is true,” says Emily Butler, assistant professor of Family Studies and Human Development at The University of Arizona and the study’s lead author.

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[This ResearchLink](#) summarizes the following report:

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