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Antecedent life events in the development of bulimia nervosa

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INTRODUCTION

✓ Some studies suggest that certain life events may play a role in precipitating the onset of bulimia nervosa

✓ For instance Welch, Doll and Fairburn (1997) conclude that events **involving disruption of family or social relationships**, or a **threat to physical safety**, were especially common among the bulimia nervosa cases.

✓ The onset of bulimia nervosa has been also associated with **losses and separations from significant others** (Pyle et al., 1981; Lacey et al., 1986), **interpersonal problems with family and friends and health problems** (Schmidt et al., 1993, 1997), and **criticism related to shape, weight or eating** (Fairburn et al., 1998; Jacobi et al., 2004; Pike et al., 2008).

Aims

→ To investigate the occurrence of life events preceding the onset of bulimia nervosa

→ **Two questions** were addressed in this study:

1. Did patients with bulimia nervosa experience a significantly greater number of stressful life events in the year immediately preceding the emergence of their eating problems compared with matched controls at the same stage of their lives?

2. Are particularly types of antecedent life events especially likely to precede the onset of bulimia nervosa?

METHOD

Participants

✓ 60 female patients with bulimia nervosa (M=21.52; SD=4.86) (BN group);

✓ 60 female patients with a current DSM-IV axis I psychiatry disorder, but without a history of clinically significant eating disorders symptoms (PC group);

✓ 60 female who did not meet criteria for any current Axis I psychiatry disorder and had no history of eating problems. (NC group)

- **Groups were matched on age and socioeconomic status**

Instruments

Clinical Diagnosis

✓ Eating Disorders Examination (EDE, 14^a edition - Version 14.3; Fairburn & Cooper, 2000)

✓ Eating Disorders Examination - Questionnaire (EDE-Q, 4^a edition; Fairburn & Beglin, 1994)

✓ Structured Clinical Interview for DSM - IV (SCID-I; Spitzer, Williams, Gibbon & First, 1992).

Antecedent life events

✓ The Oxford Risk Factor Interview Schedule (RFI; Fairburn & Welch, 1990).

RESULTS

BN vs control groups: number of antecedents

	BN (n=60) n (%)	NC n (%)	X ² P	OR	95%CI	AUC%	PC (n=60) n (%)	X ² P	OR	95%CI	AUC%
No events	4 (6.7)	17 (28.3)	0.488 0.469	1.630	0.433- 6.129	39.2	13 (21.7)	0.508 0.465	1.662	0.425- 6.498	42.3
One event	7 (11.7)	20 (33.3)	-	-	-	39.2	11 (18.3)				46.5
Two events	6 (10.0)	11 (18.3)	-0.339 0.562	0.712	0.226- 2.244	45.8	11 (18.3)				45.7
Three or more events	43 (71.7)	12 (20.0)	-0.178 0.746	0.837	0.284- 2.464	75.8	24 (40.0)	-0.07- 0.864	0.931	0.411- 2.108	65.5

Bn vs control groups: types of antecedents

	BN (n=60) n (%)	NC n (%)	X ² P	OR	95%CI	AUC%	PC (n=60) n (%)	X ² P	OR	95%CI	AUC%
Major house move	8 (13.3)	10 (16.7)				48.3	10 (16.7)				49.0
House move for different country	0 (-)	2 (3.3)				48.3	0 (-)				50.0
Significant episode of physical illness	13 (21.7)	8 (13.3)				54.2	13 (21.7)				49.8
Pregnancy	1 (1.7)	1 (1.7)				50.0	1 (1.7)				50.0
Bereavement (close relative/friend/partner)	14 (23.3)	10 (16.7)				53.3	15 (25.0)				49.0
Member leaving the family	19 (31.7)	12 (20.0)				55.8	16 (26.7)				52.3
Member joining the family	13 (21.7)	5 (8.3)	2.63 0.12 8	13.94	0.4688 - 414.6	56.7	6 (10.0)				55.7
Beginning of relationship	15 (25.0)	7 (11.7)	0.90 0.33 9	2.473	0.3859 - 15.85	56.7	6 (10.0)	0.892 0.119	2.441	0.7958 - 7.486	57.4
End of relationship	9 (15.0)	5 (8.3)				53.3	5 (8.3)				54.1
Sexual abuse	2 (3.3)	0 (-)				51.7	1 (1.7)				50.8
Physical abuse	10 (16.7)	1 (1.7)	1.40 0.48 9	4.08	0.07536 - 220.8	57.5	2 (3.3)				56.6
Stress from school	21 (35.5)	6 (10.0)	- 0.06 68 0.94	0.935 4	0.121 - 7.232	62.5	19 (31.7)				51.4
Stress from other source	31 (51.7)	10 (16.7)				67.5	22 (36.7)				57.2
Critical comments about weight/shape or eating	40 (66.7)	6 (10.0)	3.76 0.00 408	43.25	3.306 - 565.9	78.3	15 (25.0)	1.748 <.001	5.743	2.207 - 14.94	70.6
Anything else significant	16 (26.7)	6 (10.0)	1.78 0.20 6	5.96	0.3747 - 94.79		10 (16.7)				

DISCUSSION

Main Findings:

→ Women with bulimia nervosa had a significantly **higher risk of exposure to a specific life event** – critical comments about shape, weight or eating than both the non-psychiatric (large size effect) and psychiatric control women (medium size effect) during the same period of time in their lives;

→ No differences were found in the exposure to number of life events during the year before onset of eating disturbance between bulimia nervosa and both control groups.

→ **Consistent with other studies** (Fairburn et al., 1998; Jacobi et al., 2004; Pike et al., 2008) the findings of this study suggest that **criticism related to shape, weight or eating** render an individual particularly vulnerable to the development of bulimia nervosa.