

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EATING BEHAVIORS OF BLACK WOMEN WHO BINGE EAT

Lisette Bahena, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, UNC-Chapel Hill  
 & Rachel W. Goode, PhD, MPH, School of Social Work, UNC-Chapel Hill

## BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has had detrimental effects on both physical and mental health. Individuals with eating disorders may face a unique risk that may affect symptoms of eating disorders, like dietary restriction, binge eating, and compensatory behaviors, due to the impact of COVID-19 on food availability. Furthermore, changes in the availability of treatment, isolation due to social distancing, and financial barriers interfere with progress and contribute to potential relapse in individuals. While COVID-19 has affected every American, little is known on how COVID-19 has affected women with binge eating disorder, particularly Black women. Emerging literature has found that Black women report similar or more binge eating episodes than their White counterparts. Understanding the effects of COVID-19 on the eating behaviors of those who binge eat can hopefully lead to more personalized care post-pandemic. This study is a secondary data analysis project aimed to examine the unique impact of COVID-19 on the eating behaviors in women of color who binge eat.

## METHODS

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect socio-demographic data and used questions designed to gather participants' perspectives on factors influencing their eating behaviors. The interviews were about 45-60 minutes in length. Participants were recruited from doctors' offices, community agencies, and churches within the region. 20 women who met the criteria were interviewed. Criteria included having a BMI>25 and having verified presence of binge eating through the Eating Disorder Examination. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed in order to find themes related to eating behavior changes due to COVID-19.

## THEMES

### INCREASED TIME IN A TRIGGERING ENVIRONMENT

*"I don't have any grasp of food boundaries, to be honest. And then we had to go stock up because we didn't know what to expect. And I think that was about the worst thing to do ever, because I ate more once I stocked up."*

### LACK OF STRUCTURE

*"I definitely have been staying up later and then eating at night. And so normally I would probably like if it was a regular work day, I would probably be in a bed...and I wouldn't be eating anything, but now I don't know. I don't have a real bed time. So then I'll probably eat something."*

### BOREDOM

*"Definitely being bored and know that doesn't help. I definitely do a lot of bored eating or stress eating because I work from home. So then when I get stressed at work like from emails and whatnot. And I tend to eat more, especially since now I'm so close to the kitchen as well. Yeah."*

### LACK OF CONTROL

*"I've learned the lack of control and like...COVID...the lack of having control in your personal life. Everyday decision-making has made me lose control with eating."*

### LIMITED FOOD AVAILABILITY

*"Eating all of those foods that I normally wouldn't eat because that's what we had accessible."*

### AS A COPING MECHANISM

*"Something that was enjoyable that was like comforting was food. I would say the help cope with, you know, loss of job, loss of relationships, all the social distancing, the loneliness."*

## RESULTS

We identified 5 themes that describe the impact of COVID-19 on Black women who binge eat: increased time in triggering environment (e.g. proximity to foods at home), lack of structure (e.g. irregular meal times), lack of control (e.g. uncertainty of duration of pandemic), limited food availability (e.g. grocery stores running out of milk, eggs, etc.), and as a coping mechanism (e.g. dealing with loneliness of social distancing).

## CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that Black women were negatively affected by COVID-19 leading to an increase in unwanted eating behaviors. Binge or emotional eating may serve as a coping mechanism due to the uncertain length of the pandemic and the increase in social isolation. Furthermore, our findings add to the limited research in Black women who binge eat and how COVID-19 has impacted their eating behaviors. Similar to previous research, a lack of structure, increased time in a triggering environment, and lack of social support are consequences of the pandemic that have led to an increase in unwanted eating behaviors. Future research should focus on developing personalized treatment that addresses changes in treatment due to the pandemic, while still being culturally-relevant.

## REFERENCE

Termorshuizen, J. D., Watson, H. J., Thornton, L.M., Borg, S., Flatt, R. E., MacDermod, C. M., Harper, L. E., van Furth, E. F., Peat, C. M., & Bulik, C. M. (2020). Early impact of COVID-19 on individuals with self-reported eating disorders: A survey of ~1,000 individuals in the United States and the Netherlands. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 53(11), 1780-1790. doi: 10.1002/eat.23353