

Social Support, Body Mass Index and Depressive Symptoms

High Body Mass Index (BMI) has frequently been associated with numerous negative effects on health. As the obesity rate in the U.S. steadily increases, the relation between BMI and subsequent health consequences are becoming more apparent. Previous research has found that perceived peer isolation mediates the association between BMI and depressive symptoms, but few studies have examined this effect with social support. The current study examined data from Waves 1 and 2 (roughly ages 11 to 21) of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to determine whether social support mediated the association between Body Mass Index (BMI) and depressive symptoms. Multiple regression, Sobel, and bootstrap analyses suggested that social support demonstrated partial mediation of the relation between BMI and depressive symptoms in Wave 1. In Wave 2 social support mediated the association between BMI and depressive symptoms, but only in women. These findings demonstrate that social support is an important factor to understand when examining associations between BMI and depressive symptoms. Further analysis suggests that this effect may be more significant in women during the period of emerging adulthood. These findings suggest that people who have higher BMI may experience reduced social support which contributes to an increase of depressive symptoms. A practical application of this finding would be to implement interventions which are aimed at improving social support in order to alleviate depressive symptoms that may be caused by being overweight. Since this study only examined this effect with cross-sectional data, future research may want to examine this effect longitudinally to determine the direction of effects.