

Eating your feelings? The link between job stress, junk food and sleep

June 22 2017, by Chu-Hsiang Chang, Andy Henion



A good night sleep can serve as a buffer between work stress and overeating, suggests a study co-authored by Chu-Hsiang 'Daisy' Chang, associate professor of psychology at Michigan State University. Credit: Michigan State University

Stress during the workday can lead to overeating and unhealthy food choices at dinnertime, but there could be a buffer to this harmful pattern.

A good night's sleep can serve as a protecting factor between job stress and unhealthy eating in the evening, indicates a new study co-authored by a Michigan State University scholar.

The study, published online in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, is one of the first to investigate how psychological experiences at work shape eating behaviors.

"We found that employees who have a stressful workday tend to bring their [negative feelings](#) from the workplace to the dinner table, as manifested in eating more than usual and opting for more junk food instead of healthy food," said Chu-Hsiang "Daisy" Chang, MSU associate professor of psychology and study co-author.

"However, another key finding showed how sleep helped people deal with their stressful eating after work," she added. "When workers slept better the night before, they tended to eat better when they experienced stress the next day."

The research involved two studies of 235 total workers in China. One study dealt with information-technology employees who regularly experienced high workload and felt there was never enough time in the workday. The second study involved call-center workers who often got stressed from having to deal with rude and demanding customers.

In both cases, workday stress was linked to employees' negative mood while on the job, which in turn was linked to unhealthy eating in the evening, said Yihao Liu, co-author and assistant professor at the University of Illinois.

The study proposed two potential explanations, Liu said.

"First, eating is sometimes used as an activity to relieve and regulate

one's negative mood, because individuals instinctually avoid aversive [feelings](#) and approach desire feelings," he said. "Second, unhealthy eating can also be a consequence of diminished self-control. When feeling stressed out by work, individuals usually experience inadequacy in exerting effective control over their cognitions and behaviors to be aligned with personal goals and social norms."

Chang said the finding that sleep protects against unhealthy eating following [workday](#) stress shows how the health behaviors are related.

"A good night's sleep can make workers replenished and feel vigorous again, which may make them better able to deal with stress at work the next day and less vulnerable to unhealthy eating," she said.

To address the problem, companies should emphasize the importance of health management for their employees and consider sleep-awareness training and flexible scheduling.

Companies should also reconsider the value of food-related job perks, which have become very common.

"Food-related perks may only serve as temporary mood-altering remedies for stressed employees," Chang said, "and failure to address the sources of the work [stress](#) may have potential long-term detrimental effects on [employee](#) health."

The paper is titled "Eating your feelings? Testing a model of employees' work-related stressors, sleep quality and [unhealthy eating](#)."

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