The Relationship between Adolescent Self-Perception of Weight, Mental Health and Social-Protective Factors

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With increasing importance placed on physical appearance in our culture, body image and weight worries may negatively affect the emotional well-being of adolescents. However, researchers disagree as to how an adolescent’s weight, their perception of their weight and their mental health status relate.1,2

The purpose of our study was to examine mental distress and social-protective factors in youths of varying weights and their perceptions of their weight.

Design/Methods

We used 2013 Minnesota Student Survey data from 122,180 students (8th, 9th and 11th graders).3 Using self-reported information, adolescents were classified based on their perception of their weight (overweight or not overweight) and their weight status (not overweight, overweight or obese). Weight status classifications were based on BMI (kg/m²) percentiles from age- and sex-specific CDC growth charts.

Internal mental distress was measured using a validated screener assessing somatic, depressive and anxiety symptoms; traumatic distress; and homicidal or suicidal thoughts during the past year.4 Protective factors examined were connectedness with parents, school and friends and internal assets.

Results

Girls in all weight status groups were more likely than boys to perceive themselves as being overweight. For all weight status groups, adolescents who perceived themselves as being overweight reported significantly higher internal mental distress and lower mean levels of protective factors as compared with adolescents who did not perceive themselves as being overweight.

For example, among adolescents who were overweight, those who perceived themselves as being overweight were more likely to report high internal mental distress (45.8% of girls, 24.3% of boys) than those who did not perceive themselves as being overweight (32.0% of girls, 14.3% of boys).

The adolescents with the highest frequency of high internal mental distress were those who perceive themselves as being overweight but who are not overweight; in this group, 54.2% of girls and 33.7% of boys reported high internal mental distress.

In general, adolescents of all weights who perceived themselves to be overweight reported fewer protective factors than those who did not perceive themselves as being overweight.

Conclusion

Perceiving oneself as overweight during adolescence is a risk factor for internal mental distress and decreased social protective factors, and thus has significant implications for adolescent health and well-being. Primary care clinicians and counselors should assess weight perception in addition to weight status when caring for adolescents. MM

References