

# NEWS RELEASE

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BLACK DOG INSTITUTE



## **CHOCOLATE CRAVING WHEN DEPRESSED: A PERSONALITY MARKER**

An Australian study has found a link between chocolate craving and people's personalities.

The Black Dog Institute undertook the study, published in the October 2007 issue of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*. It looks at the benefits of eating chocolate during a depressive episode, and whether there is a link between personality type and craving chocolate to alleviate symptoms.

The study found that people who rate highly on personality styles of irritability, rejection sensitivity, anxious worrying, self-criticism and self-focus (the five personality dimensions associated with emotional dysregulation) crave chocolate and use it to soothe their anxiety.

By contrast, no correlation was found with the other three personality dimensions – two measuring shyness (personal reserve and social avoidance) and perfectionism.

The study also found that more women than men craved chocolate when they are depressed.

Authors of the study are Professor Gordon Parker, Executive Director of the Black Dog Institute, and Joanna Crawford, a Research Assistant at the Institute.

For most people, as Professor Parker explained, chocolate is enjoyable and pleasurable.

Some people, however, engage in 'comfort eating' or 'emotional eating'. For these people, chocolate has no real or lasting psychological benefit and can lead to mood worsening.

Others crave chocolate when in a 'dysphoric' (anxious, stressed, depressed) state, and say that it helps their mood, Professor Parker said.

In testing whether this was true or false, the Institute asked nearly 3000 people reporting clinical depression (i.e. experiencing depressive symptoms for more than two weeks and requiring treatment) to undertake a web-based questionnaire. Their average age was 40, and over 70 percent were female. Over 73 percent had previously received antidepressant medication, and over 78 percent counselling or psychotherapy for depressive episodes.

It was found that when depressed, over 54 percent of respondents reported food cravings, with nearly 45 percent specifically craving chocolate (about half of the women and third of the men).

Of the chocolate craving group, nearly 61 percent of those who rated chocolate's capacity to improve their depressed mood as 'moderately' to 'very important' were more likely to rate it as making them feel significantly less anxious and less irritable.

Further analysis showed that irritability and rejection sensitivity were the only two significant predictors of chocolate craving. Those identified as chocolate cravers also had higher scores for appetite increase, weight gain, sensitivity to rejection, oversleeping, and limbs feeling 'heavy like lead'.

Professor Parker said the most intriguing finding was the specific link between chocolate craving and personality style.

"The result suggests that people with certain personality styles crave chocolate, not only when they are depressed, but also when they are anxious and irritable and that eating chocolate improves their mood," he said

"About 15 percent of the population have the personality styles reflecting 'emotional dysregulation'. This means that, their limbic cortex, the brain circuitry that regulates our responses to a threat, whether consciously or unconsciously perceived, is more active – always on the alert and predisposing to anxiety and depression."

Professor Parker explained that for these people, chocolate appears to have a calming effect on that heightened state of readiness, and the emotional responses.

"It seems chocolate cravings may reflect biological mechanisms for soothing personality-based emotional states like anxiety, irritability and depression." he said

People can undertake the Personality Test by logging onto [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)

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