- Digestion

BETTER LIVING THROUGH SCIENCE



A VOLUME CONTROL FOR YOUR APPETITE

Can we turn down 'food noise' to make healthy eating easier?

by IAN TAYLOR
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Of all the myriad mysteries of science, the one that's currently got my neurons in a twist concerns a Toffee Crisp stashed away in my kitchen cupboard. I'm entirely preoccupied by it – it's like being pulled by some metaphysical tide.

The question is, how? How can a chocolate bar scrape away at my willpower when – the last time I checked – I was a halfway-intelligent adult who should know better?

The answer may have something to do with 'food noise': those persistent, intrusive thoughts about food and eating between mealtimes. In the case of my bewitching Toffee Crisp, these thoughts are probably a short-lived distraction that I'll give in to within the hour.

For some people, however, food noise is a more serious problem, that's according to Daisuke Hayashi, a doctoral researcher at Pennsylvania State University. He says that when the volume is dialled up, food noise is a feed of "constant and obsessive thoughts that detract from a person's wellbeing and make it difficult for them to make healthy choices."

Very little research has been done on food noise, but in 2023, Hayashi and his colleagues authored a paper that tried to marry anecdotal accounts of food noise with what we already know about how humans respond to food cues. His team is now working on a number of studies to delve into it further.

"I'd say the research on food noise is at a stage where asking the right questions and seeking empirical data is more important than making confident assumptions," Hayashi points out. "One thing I can tell you from our preliminary data is that the majority of reports on social media describe food noise as a source of suffering and something people would rather live without."

Hayashi believes food noise occurs as a constant and intense response to food cues – anything from an ad on social media, to the smell of somebody's cooking, to the internal processes that control our appetite-regulating hormones. Responding to those cues is what keeps us nourished, but some people's responses are heightened.

"It's likely that a combination of individual characteristics – genetics, lifestyle, stress – and environments that are specifically designed to constantly expose us to powerful external food cues is what leads to someone experiencing food noise."

One interesting line of research comes from work on GLP-1 agonists, the class of weight-loss drugs that includes Ozempic.

"Anecdotal reports seem to indicate many people use the term 'food noise' to describe their obsessive thought patterns around food before receiving such treatments," Hayashi says. "My hypothesis is that one of the effects of these drugs, which might explain their effectiveness in treating obesity, is that they make people less responsive to food cues, thus making them less susceptible to food noise."

More research will answer that question, as well as others such as which people are most susceptible to food noise.

In the meantime, if you're looking for strategies to deal with intrusive thoughts about food (or rogue Toffee Crisp cravings), Hayashi recommends speaking with a dietician. They can help you look for patterns in your eating and plan strategies to build resilience against food cues. These may include things like slow, mindful eating or eating more at mealtimes to avoid hunger pangs between meals.

More importantly, Hayashi says, you have to avoid the guilt trap of thinking that struggles with food are some kind of personal failing.

"We're living in a paradoxical society where our culture constantly bombards us with messages glorifying thinness and muscularity, while also presenting us with non-stop exposure to external food cues that persuade us to make poor dietary choices," he says. "That – combined with social structures that make accessing healthy foods more difficult than eating convenient, highly processed foods of low nutritional value – is a perfect formula for struggling with food noise." **SF**

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