



## A Literature Review on Stress and Eating Disorders in Adolescents: Psychological and Behavioral Perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Stress affects adolescent health, often leading to unhealthy eating and increasing the risk of eating disorders, especially in young women. Academic pressures and body image concerns intensify stress-related eating. Interventions like mindfulness and nutrition education can support healthier coping and reduce eating disorders in youth. **Purpose:** The study aims to highlight the significant impact that stress can have on eating behaviors and to provide insights into how these factors are interconnected. **Methods:** A review of the literature from 2019 to 2024 was conducted as part of this research technique using PubMed and Science Direct, the keywords "stress level," "eating disorder," and "adolescent". **Results:** The literature review found a significant association between high stress levels and the prevalence of eating disorders in adolescents, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address this issue. **Conclusions:** Beyond merely reiterating the observed correlation, this review emphasizes the urgent necessity for integrated approaches that combine stress management techniques with nutritional education in school settings. Practical implications include the development of school-based programs that incorporate mindfulness training, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) principles, and workshops on healthy eating habits. Furthermore, early identification and intervention strategies, such as routine mental health screenings and accessible counseling services, are crucial to mitigate the long-term impact of stress-induced eating disorders.

### KEYWORDS

Stress level, Eating disorder, Adolescent

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### 1. BACKGROUND

Stress is a pervasive factor that significantly influences both physical and mental health, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The complex relationship between stress and health

involves a dynamic interplay of behavioral, endocrine, and neural systems. Stress affects health directly through autonomic and neuroendocrine changes, as well as indirectly by shaping behaviors, such as eating habits (Hill et al., 2023). Research

consistently shows a strong link between stress and unhealthy eating patterns, with stress-induced overeating or undereating being a common coping mechanism, particularly among younger populations. This relationship is further complicated by the impact of stress on mental health, with conditions like anxiety, depression, and eating disorders often co-occurring, exacerbating both the psychological and physical implications of stress.

In college students, especially freshmen, the transition to new academic, social, and personal environments can increase stress levels, which can lead to the development of unhealthy eating behaviors ([Anderson](#), 2019). First-year students are particularly vulnerable to the onset of eating disorders due to the pressures they face, including academic demands, social adjustment, and body image concerns. According to [Wuryaningsih et al.](#), (2020), education is a significant factor in stress level indicators. Apart from educational factors, the experiences of each individual also influence stress levels and stress coping. These challenges disproportionately affect young women, despite eating disorders being a significant mental health problem across all genders. Existing research highlights the importance of addressing

college students' mental health through interventions such as mindfulness training, nutrition education, and emotion regulation strategies to prevent eating disorders and support overall well-being. In addition, improving self-efficacy can play a role in effective action-taking as it influences thoughts, motivates and affects adolescents' ability to manage stress ([Wuryaningsih et al.](#), 2020).

Studies in diverse regions, such as Southeast Asia and South America, have demonstrated the far-reaching effects of stress on eating behaviors, with stress impacting male and female students differently ([Clara et al.](#), 2023). In Southeast Asia, for example, high stress levels were found to correlate with poor eating behaviors, including emotional eating and irregular meal schedules. Similarly, research in Chile shows a high prevalence of anxiety, mood disorders, and eating disorders among adolescents, particularly females, underscoring the need for targeted intervention programs at the school level ([Caqueo-Urizar et al.](#), 2021).

Adolescence is a developmental period marked by significant emotional, cognitive, and physical changes that place individuals at heightened risk for developing eating disorders, especially when

compounded by stress, anxiety, and body image concerns (Makki et al., 2024). In many countries, including Austria, studies have shown that female adolescents are particularly vulnerable to developing disordered eating behaviors due to factors like perfectionism, low self-esteem, and social anxiety (Sander et al., 2021). Longitudinal data suggests that these early signs of disordered eating often predict future eating disorders, with anxiety and depression playing a key role in exacerbating eating-related impairments.

The prevalence of eating disorders among adolescents is further compounded by social pressures, the influence of media, and peer comparisons, which often lead to body dissatisfaction and unhealthy weight control behaviors. Studies have explored the links between body dissatisfaction, stress, depression, and disordered eating, with findings suggesting that these factors collectively increase the risk for eating disorders. This is particularly concerning given the rise of obesity rates in adolescents, where stress, sedentary lifestyles, and poor dietary choices often interact, leading to further health complications. In addition to psychological factors, physical activity has emerged as a potential buffer against stress-related eating behaviors. Regular physical

activity may help to improve emotional regulation and satiety, potentially reducing stress-driven food choices and contributing to better physical and mental health outcomes, particularly in individuals with higher body mass indices (BMI) or those experiencing loneliness (Tan et al., 2024).

The impact of stress on eating behaviors is also evident in the context of global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted daily routines and social support systems, exacerbating stress and mental health issues among students (Clara et al., 2023). In countries like Indonesia, increased stress levels during the pandemic were linked to unhealthy eating behaviors and a higher risk for developing eating disorders. Understanding how stress influences eating patterns in this context is crucial for developing effective interventions to support students' mental health during times of crisis.

In conclusion, the relationship between stress and eating behaviors is multifaceted, with stress playing a significant role in the development of both obesity and eating disorders. The interplay of stress, mental health, and eating patterns highlights the need for comprehensive, multidimensional approaches to intervention, particularly for adolescents

and young adults. Addressing this complex issue requires further research into the mechanisms linking stress, eating behaviors, and mental health, as well as targeted strategies to support healthier coping mechanisms, improve emotional regulation, and prevent the onset of eating disorders.

## 2. METHODS

This research uses the literature review method. Literature sources were collected from research journal databases and the Internet, focusing on Pubmed and Science Direct a between 2019 until 2024. Search keywords in English were used to find relevant literature. The literature search used English, with the keywords used in the search being “Stress Level” AND “Eating Disorder” AND “Adolescent”.

The journal search process begins by identifying specific keywords. At the search stage 24,256 journals were found relevant to

the keywords used. The next step is to filter by journal publication year to ensure that the journals meet the criteria needed in the research. During the screening stage 6.498 journals were found that met the criteria. The publications were then screened based on the research criteria for inclusion and exclusion. 2.276 journal fulfilled the inclusion and exclusion criteria obtained in the search.

At the next stage, 21 journals met the initial criteria. The journals were then screened again based on abstrack matchinh and results matching other predetermined criteria. After the screening process, 15 journals were selected as suitable and worthy of further research. Based on a thorough review of the full text, theme, population, methods, and results, the final 15 articles were selected. The results of this screening process are shown in the following PRISMA chart.

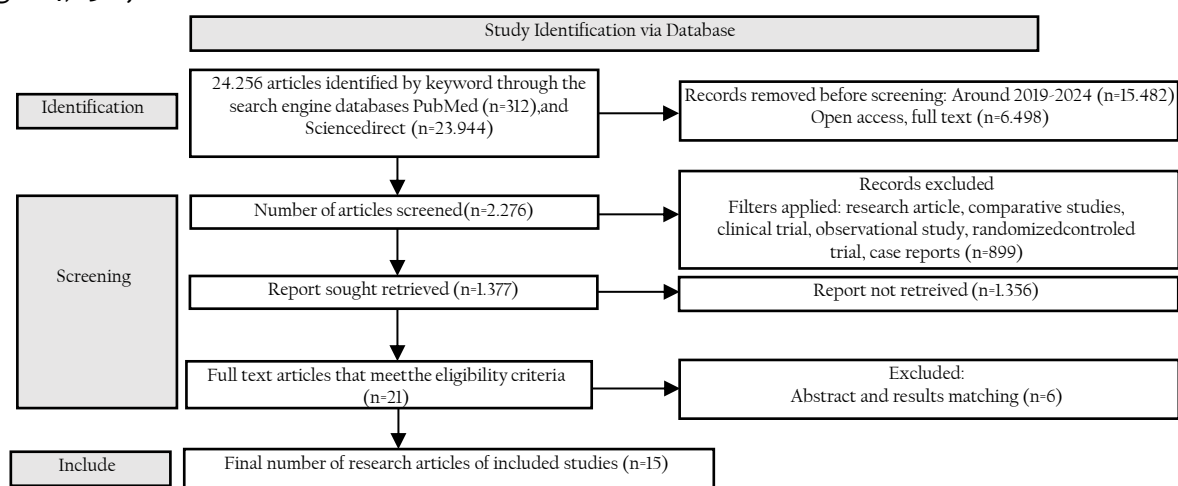


Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart

### 3. RESULTS

After examining the studies and articles, 15 studies showed an association between stress levels and eating disorders in

adolescents. For more detailed information, see table 1 for the results of the following literature analysis.

**Table 1.** Results of Article Analysis

No	Title	Author	Objective	Design	Subject	Result	Factor
1.	Exploring the Longitudinal Association between Stress and Unhealthy Eating Behaviors: The Role of Physical Activity, BMI, and Loneliness	Tan et al. 2024	The purpose of this study was to highlight the need for further investigation into the nuances of stress-related eating patterns and the limitations of self-report measures in dietary intake.	Cross-sectional study	The amount of data is 1.325 students who were included in the final sample after several participants were excluded due to exclusion criteria.	The study explores the complex relationships between stress, physical activity, loneliness, and eating behaviors among university students, particularly focusing on sweet and savory snack intake and uncontrolled eating. Key findings indicate that stress significantly correlates with uncontrolled eating, especially in individuals with higher BMI, while physical activity appears to mitigate this effect.	stress, unhealthy eating behavior, physical activity, BMI, loneliness
2.	Disordered Eating Concerns, Behaviors, and Severity in Young Adults Clustered by Anxiety and Depression	Eck & Byrd-Bredbenner 2021	This study examined the relationship between disordered eating, behavior, and the severity of depression and anxiety	quantitative approach	The study involved 1.792 college students who completed surveys to assess levels of anxiety, depression, and eating problems and disorders	Research shows that as the severity of anxiety and depression increases, so does disordered eating behavior. This shows that even subclinical levels require assessment and intervention. These findings advocate integrated campus programs that address mental health and eating disorders	Anxiety and Depression, eating disorders, severity of eating disorders
3	Depressive, Anxiety, and Stress Symptoms Among Schoolgirls with Disordered Eating Behaviors	Makki et al. 2024	The study objectives emphasize the need for targeted interventions and educational strategies to address the psychological and sociocultural factors that influence eating behavior in this demographic.	The current quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional study	The amount of data 347 participants came from research involving girls aged between 13 and 18 years, with a mean age of 14.16 years and a standard deviation of 1.25 years	The studies reviewed focus on the prevalence and factors associated with eating disorders and disordered eating behavior among adolescents and young adults, particularly the impact of mental health, dissatisfaction with body image, and social influences such as peer pressure and the media. A study specifically examined female students in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, significant levels	Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress, Eating Disorders, Body Image and Self-Satisfaction, Pressure from Peers and Media

No	Title	Author	Objective	Design	Subject	Result	Factor
						of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as the prevalence of disordered eating behavior.	
4.	Relationship between Stress Level and Risk of Eating Disorder in Undergraduate Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic	Clara et al. 2023	This study aims to examine the relationship between stress levels and the risk of eating disorders among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Semarang, Indonesia. A very weak positive correlation was found between stress and eating disorders, with most respondents experiencing moderate stress.	Analytic observational study with cross-sectional approach	The amount of data 110 respondents. Most respondents experienced moderate levels of stress, with 25.5% reporting low stress, 68.2% moderate stress, and 6.4% high stress	The research is a significant correlation between stress levels and the risk of eating disorders, with a p value = 0.005. However, the relationship was very weak ( $r=0.097$ ), despite increased stress levels during the pandemic, the risk of eating disorders among college students remained low, possibly due to adaptive coping strategies and social support	The factors examined in the study included stress levels and risk of eating disorders among university students. In addition, the study also considered demographic factors such as age, gender, BMI, GPA, economic status, and isolation status
5.	Stressful Life Events and Resilience in Individuals with and without a History of Eating Disorders: A Latent Class Analysis	Lie et al. 2023	This study used mixed modeling to identify latent clusters based on exposure to stressful life events (SLEs) and protection/vulnerability patterns (resilience and emotion regulation) in individuals with and without a history of eating disorders (EDs), and tested whether protection/vulnerability classes moderated the relationship between SLE classes and psychopathology scores	Cross-sectional study	The amount of respondents in the study was 916 individuals. Of the total, 95% were women, with a mean age of 29.6 years (SD 10.7 years). Respondents were divided into two group 495 individuals classified as cases (who had a history of eating disorders) and 395 individuals as controls (without a history of eating disorders).	The study research is that protective factors, such as resilience and emotional regulation, play an important role in reducing the impact of stressful life events (SLE) on mental health, especially in individuals with eating disorders (ED). Research shows that individuals with lower levels of protectiveness tend to experience higher levels of eating disorder symptoms, depression, and anxiety.	Resilience, Stressful Life Events, SLE, Latent Profile Analysis



No	Title	Author	Objective	Design	Subject	Result	Factor
6.	Correlation between Level of Stress and Risk of Eating Disorder Symptoms in Early Adult Individuals	Girhani et al. 2022	This study aims to determine the relationship between level of stress and risk of eating disorders symptoms in early adult individuals.	Cross-sectional study	The research sample amounted to 172 people consisting of men and women aged 18-22 years, experiencing symptoms of eating disorders, and domiciled in Jabodetabek..	This study explained that there were 93 participants with a very high stress level category and there were 113 participants proven to be at risk of eating disorders. These results indicate a significant relationship between stress levels and the risk of eating disorder symptoms.	Stress level and risk of eating disorder symptoms
7.	Anxiety, Stress, and Binge Eating Tendencies in Adolescence: A Prospective Approach	Lim et al. 2021	The aim of the study was to determine the longitudinal relationship between anxiety and stress levels and the tendency to overeat.	the CogBIAS Longitudinal Study.	The sample in this study involved 324 adolescents	Based on the research that has been conducted, results show that stress levels are a negative predictor of uncontrolled eating. High stress is associated with uncontrolled eating, but emotional stress can also lead to loss of appetite. In this case stress levels have a significant relationship with disordered eating.	anxiety, stress, and binge eating tendencies in adolescents
8.	Examining the Correlation between Stress and Disordered Eating	Liu et al. 2022	This study aims to experimentally investigate the relationship between stress levels and eating disorders.	quantitative correlational design	The study sample consisted of 38 participants aged between 15 - 45 years who were recruited online to complete the DASS-21 and EDE-Q questionnaire s.	The study showed that there was a significant positive correlation between stress and eating disorder behavior in 38 participants. Anxiety levels were also positively associated with eating disorders. These results prove that increased stress is closely related to the tendency of unhealthy eating behaviors	stress levels and disordered eating behaviors
9.	Stress Level and Emotional Eating in Obese and Non-obese adolescents	Wardani et al. 2024	This study aims to analyze the differences between stress levels and emotional eating in obese and non-obese adolescents.	analytical case-control study	Sample consisted of 139 obese and non-obese adolescent respondents aged 15-18 years who were selected using multistage random sampling.	Significant differences in stress levels and emotional eating between obese and non-obese adolescents. Obese adolescents showed higher stress levels than non-obese adolescents. This means that there is a relationship between stress levels and eating disorders.	Stress level, emotional eating, nutritional status

No	Title	Author	Objective	Design	Subject	Result	Factor
10.	Association between Stress and Eating Behaviour Among Malaysian Adolescents Prior to Examination	<a href="#">Shah</a> et al. 2023	This study aimed to investigate the level of stress and its impact on eating behavior among Malaysian adolescents.	cross-sectional study	The study sample consisted of 797 multi-ethnic secondary school students in malaysia who were approximately 16 years old and came from various urban and rural public schools in three states in peninsular malaysia.	This study found that about 29.1% of Malaysian adolescents experienced high stress especially in females and urban students. There was a significant positive correlation between stress and emotional eating behaviors especially emotional overeating and food responsiveness. The results also explained that there was no significant correlation between salivary cortisol and eating behavior.	Perceived stress levels and eating behavior patterns among Malaysian adolescents
11.	Daily Stress and Eating Behaviors in Adolescents and Young Adults: Investigating the Role of Cortisol Reactivity and Eating Styles	<a href="#">Hill</a> et al. 2023	This study aimed how daily stress affects eating behavior, focusing on cortisol reactivity and eating style as moderating factors. Using an online diary method, it highlights the need for further research into stress-related eating patterns in adolescents and young adults.	Online diary method	Teenagers aged 16 from high school or college at the University of Leeds. A total of 136 participants were then shortlisted to 123 participants, 59 teenagers and 64 young adults.	The study found that stress increased snack intake, but the effect was reduced in individuals with high cortisol reactivity. The findings also highlight the importance of adolescence in the formation of stress-related eating habits and advocate the use of more objective measurement methods in the future.	Understanding the Relationship between Stress and Eating Behavior
12.	The Relation between Disordered Eating, Stress, and Anxiety in First-year College Women	<a href="#">Anderson</a> 2019	This article examines the relationship between eating disorders, stress and anxiety in freshmen and the impact of demographics on mental health risk. It also identified high-risk students and recommended campus interventions to address the issue.	Quantitative approach and correlational study	Freshmen are 18-year-old, predominantly cisgender and white females, who are recruited through college classes and online platforms with full consent.	This study found that almost 40% of freshmen experienced eating disorders, especially in women who are more prone to stress and anxiety. The study recommends further research with a more diverse sample to clarify this relationship.	High risk of eating disorders and transition to college



No	Title	Author	Objective	Design	Subject	Result	Factor
13.	Correlation between Stress Levels and Eating Behavior in College Students: A Study at The Faculty of Health Sciences	Muhaimin et al. 2023	This study aims to explore the influence of stress on college students' eating patterns and provide insight into the importance of effective stress management related to eating behavior.	Cross-sectional.	The study population was regular students of the Faculty of Health Sciences, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta in 2019, totaling 666 students.	Among the 2019 batch of Faculty of Health Sciences students of Surakarta Muhammadiyah University, 79.5% showed moderate stress levels, with 54.5% approaching food and 45.5% avoiding it. Pearson's test showed a significant relationship between stress level and eating behavior with a significance value <0.05.	High levels of stress among university students
14.	Depression, Anxiety, and Eating Disorder-Related Impairment: Moderators in Female Adolescents and Young Adults	Sander et al. 2021	This study examines the association of self-esteem, perfectionism and mood dysregulation with anxiety, depression and eating disorders in adolescent girls, while emphasizing the importance of tailored prevention efforts for adolescents	Longitudinal study	The study involved 320 women aged 15-25 who were at high risk for eating disorders, with each completing a minimum of two online assessments during the study period.	This study found strong associations between anxiety, depression and eating disorders in adolescent girls, especially in those with low self-esteem, high perfectionism and mood dysregulation. These results support the need for personalized and tailored preventive interventions to help high-risk adolescents manage eating disorder symptoms.	High prevalence of mental health problems
15	Relationship between Eating Disorders and Internalized Problems in Chilean Adolescents	Caqueo-Urizar et al. 2021	This study aims to analyze the prevalence of eating disorders and psychological problems in adolescents, assess differences by gender, and identify the need for early detection and intervention strategies in schools to support adolescent mental health	Cross-sectional	The study participants, aged between 12 to 18 years old, were selected through a convenience sample method and consisted of 2,277 high school students from various public, subsidized, and private educational institutions.	This study found a strong association between eating disorders and psychological problems in adolescents, especially in girls, and highlighted the importance of early detection in schools. However, limitations of the study include the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report.	High prevalence of eating disorders and psychological problems

#### 4. Discussion

15 studies have shown an association between stress levels and eating disorders in

adolescents. Research by Tan et al. (2024), found that stress correlated significantly with uncontrolled eating, although it did not

affect the consumption of sugary snacks. In fact, about 30-40% of individuals respond to stress by eating more. These results were reinforced by research [Eck & Byrd-Bredbenner](#) (2021), which concluded that the more severe an individual's anxiety and depression levels, the higher the severity of their eating disorder. Research by [Makki et al.](#) (2024), also showed that more than half of adolescent girls (58%) who experienced depression showed symptoms of eating disorders. Adolescent girls with eating disorders showed higher levels of stress, with 20.4% experiencing severe stress and 10.6% experiencing very severe stress, compared to those without eating disorders. In addition, another study stated that stressful life events contribute to the risk of eating disorders, where as many as 81% of adolescents with high stress and 32% who had experienced bullying showed high levels of eating disorders ([Lie et al.](#), 2023).

Another study from [Girhani et al.](#) (2022), also revealed a significant relationship between stress levels and eating disorders, where the results of the correlation test showed a significant value ( $p < 0.05$ ), which means there is a positive correlation between stress and the incidence of eating disorders. This phenomenon is more often experienced by

women than men, with the percentage of women experiencing stress reaching 93%. This study is in line with the findings of [Shah et al.](#) (2023) and [Anderson](#) (2019), which state that adolescent girls are more prone to experiencing high stress, with prevalence reaching 34.4%-40%.

The results of another study from [Lim et al.](#) (2021), stated that stress level was a negative predictor for uncontrolled eating. High stress is also associated with disordered eating, but emotional stress can cause loss of appetite. Research by [Liu](#) (2022) and [Clara et al.](#) (2023), found a significant positive correlation between stress levels and eating disorders, where individuals with eating disorders experienced higher frequency and severity of disordered eating behaviors. In addition, research [Wardani et al.](#) (2024), showed that stress also contributes to the development of adolescent obesity, with significant differences in stress levels and emotional eating between obese and non-obese adolescents. Most stress-prone individuals are in the age range of 15-18 years, the transition period from middle adolescence to late adolescence. Another factor causing stress among adolescents is high academic pressure, which is a major source of stress as academic performance is seen as influential

on future careers, thus increasing the risk of eating disorders. This finding is supported by research [Hill et al. \(2023\)](#), which concluded that academic stress can contribute to the incidence of eating disorders in adolescents. In addition, this study also showed that physical stress triggers increased snack intake, although this effect may be reduced in individuals with high cortisol reactivity. Research by [Muhaimin et al. \(2023\)](#), showed that as many as 63.2% of university students experienced stress, and 56.2% of them showed poor eating behavior. These findings prove the relationship between stress and the risk of eating disorders. In addition, research by (Sander et al., 2021) showed that 18.4% of adolescents experienced high levels of anxiety and depression, which may contribute to the risk of eating disorders. Additional data showed a significant prevalence of eating disorders among the same group, reinforcing the link between anxiety/depression and eating disorders. Research by [Caqueo-Urizar et al. \(2021\)](#), supports these findings by proving a direct correlation between eating behavior problems and depression. In addition, significant differences were found between women and men regarding the variables of eating problems, depression, anxiety, and social complaints.

Moreover, future studies should aim to incorporate technological advancements such as ecological momentary assessment (EMA) and mobile health (mHealth) interventions. EMA can capture real-time data on stress levels and eating behaviors in naturalistic settings, providing a more ecologically valid understanding of the relationship between these variables. mHealth interventions can deliver timely and personalized support to adolescents at risk of or experiencing eating disorders, potentially improving treatment adherence and outcomes. Additionally, research should explore the role of social media and online communities in influencing stress and eating behaviors among adolescents. Given the pervasive use of social media, it is important to understand how these platforms contribute to the development and maintenance of eating disorders, as well as how they can be leveraged for prevention and intervention efforts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

based on review of 15 research articles, highlights a strong connection between stress levels and the occurrence of eating disorders, particularly among adolescents. The findings from all 15 studies consistently demonstrate a significant correlation

between high stress levels and the development of unhealthy eating behaviors. Adolescents experiencing stress, whether from academic pressures, anxiety, or depression, are more likely to engage in maladaptive eating patterns, including overeating. The research also underscores a gender difference, with adolescent girls showing greater vulnerability to the adverse effects of stress compared to their male counterparts. In addition to academic and psychological stress, external social factors and life events contribute to heightened stress levels, further increasing the likelihood of developing eating disorders.

These findings highlight the importance of implementing holistic and multifaceted intervention strategies, particularly for adolescents and young adults who are navigating critical developmental stages. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that combines mental health support, stress management techniques, and healthy coping strategies to reduce the risk of disordered eating behaviors. Furthermore, there is a need for additional research to better understand the underlying mechanisms linking stress, eating habits, and mental health outcomes. Exploring these connections in greater detail could

inform the development of targeted interventions designed to enhance emotional regulation, promote resilience, and prevent the onset of eating disorders.

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### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Substantial contributions to conception, data collection, analysis, writing: Amelinda Nasywa Filial Gani, Fajar Dini Hariyanti, and Hasbi Asyidiq Adzahri. Manuscript revisions: Fitrio Deviantony.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

There are no potential conflicts of interest to declare.

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### **DATA AVAILABILITY**

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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