

## Striving to Eat Perfectly Healthy: Potential Pathways to Orthorexia Nervosa

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**Background:** According to the transdiagnostic cognitive-behavioural theory of eating disorders (Fairburn, 2008; Fairburn et al. 2003), perfectionism is linked to disordered eating because it cultivates a self-concept focused on appearance (appearance overvaluation) – the core psychopathology underlying anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN). Research has also shown that an appearance focused self-concept may be a mediating mechanism by which perfectionism leads to disordered eating (Joyce et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2010). In an extended study of the model, the mediated effect of an appearance focused self-concept was moderated by the extent people hold erroneous beliefs about the safety and effectiveness of maladaptive weight-control strategies (Tabri et al., 2021). Herein, I examined whether a similar moderated-mediation model may help explain orthorexia nervosa (ON) – less known and understudied eating disorder compared to AN and BN. ON is an emerging eating disorder characterised as a maladaptive fixation with eating healthy. The core focus of people with ON has to do with the perceived quality of food consumed (i.e., healthy and “clean” eating) and its effect on health (Bartel et al., 2020; Dunn & Bratman, 2016). This focus on quality over quantity is typically used to differentiate ON from AN and BN (Cena et al., 2019). We tested a moderated-mediation model in which having a self-concept focused on health is a mechanism by which perfectionism is indirectly associated with ON symptoms, particularly among people who have erroneous beliefs about the safety and effectiveness of maladaptive healthy eating strategies (e.g., eliminating all fats from one’s diet).

**Method:** Participants were community members from the US who believe they are following a healthy eating diet plan and/or believe they are leading a healthy eating lifestyle, and that do not have a pre-existing health condition that requires restricting what they eat ( $N = 456$ ). Participants completed self-report measures of all constructs.

**Results:** As expected, there was a positive indirect association between perfectionism and ON symptoms via a health focused self-concept. The indirect effect was only observed among people who hold erroneous beliefs about the safety and effectiveness of maladaptive healthy eating strategies,  $b=0.42$ , 95%CI [0.004, 0.88].

**Conclusion:** The current research replicates and extends prior research on the transdiagnostic moderated mediation model proposed by Tabri et al. (2021). More specifically, Tabri et al. (2021) showed that the moderated-mediation model has predictive utility for understanding maladaptive weight-control behaviours (i.e., dietary restraint) as well as disordered gambling. The current research adds to this emerging literature by showing that the moderated mediation model may also help explain maladaptive health eating behaviours. Together, the results of the current research support the transdiagnostic utility of the moderated-mediation model in which greater perfectionism increases disordered behaviours because it cultivates a focused self-concept, particularly among people who have erroneous beliefs about the safety and effectiveness of the disordered behaviour.