

Research Paper

Body Dissatisfaction, Perceived Stress and The Risk for Developing an Eating Disorder among Female College Students

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ABSTRACT

Body dissatisfaction seems to be on a rise among female college students. Women often feel the need to conform to societal standards regarding the ideal body type. A failure to having the ideal body may lead to an increase in dissatisfaction with one's body. This might then give rise to the use of unhealthy methods of reducing weight like vomiting, restricting one's diet, skipping meals, exercising excessively and so on. If such behaviors are maintained over a long period of time, it can increase the risk for the development of an eating disorder. A lot of students tend to indulge in eating junk food as a way of coping with the stress that they experience or skipping meals or consuming very little food whenever they feel stressed. If these behaviors persist over a long period of time it can bring an individual to a point where they find themselves at an increased risk for developing an eating disorder. The present research study was conducted in order to study the relationship between body dissatisfaction, perceived stress and the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students falling in the age range of 18 to 24 years. A sample of 120 female college students who fell in the age range of 18 to 24 years, were selected through snowball sampling in order to test the hypothesis. A sample of 12 female college students were selected through purposive and convenience sampling for collecting qualitative data. The tools used in the research study were Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16 b) by Cooper et al, SCOFF Questionnaire (Sick, Control, One, Fat, Food) by Morgan and colleagues and Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) by Cohen et al. A set of 11 questions were used for the semi-structured interview for collecting the qualitative data. The results revealed that body dissatisfaction has a significant positive correlation with the risk for developing an eating disorder ($r = .427, P < 0.001$). Perceived stress also has a significant positive correlation with the risk for developing an eating disorder ($r = .269, P < 0.001$).

Keywords: *Body dissatisfaction, female college students, perceived stress, risk for eating disorder*

The concerns regarding the body shape of an individual are common, not only among the clinical population but also in the community at large. It is often quoted and lamented in numerous studies that women college students' self-image consists of a pervasive body dissatisfaction component. "Normative discontent" is a term which is used by some

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researchers in order to refer to the dissatisfaction that women experience when it comes to their appearance (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984). This phrase (normative discontent) suggests that the prevalence of the essence of body image disturbance is large enough to be considered as a normal part of a woman's life experience (Thomson, Heinberg, Altab, & Tattleff-Dunn, 1999).

As concluded by researchers, body image disturbance is seen as one of the most salient features when it comes to eating disorders like Anorexia Nervosa (AN) and Bulimia Nervosa (BN) Bunnell, Cooper, Hertz, & Shenker, 1992; Garner & Garfinkel, 1981; Slade, 1985).

Body dissatisfaction is quite often recognised as one of the strongest predictor of symptomatology of eating disorder among women (Phelps, Johnston & Augustyniak, 1999; Polivy & Herman, 2002). Studies conducted in India reveal that the problem of concerns with body image is present to an extent of 10% to 30% in college women (Goswami, Sachdeva, 2012; Priya, Prasanna, Sucharitha, Vaz, 2010; Rashmi, Patil, Angadi, Pattanka, 2016).

Eating disorders are triggered in the minds of adolescents as a result of exposure to extremely hyped images of an ideal body on mass media networks like television. This is often followed by behaviors like over exercising, starvation, vomiting and so on which may gradually over time develop into a full blown eating disorder. Eating disorders are not just limited to western societies but are also found in Asian cultures. A study conducted in Chennai on 210 medical students revealed that 14.8% of the study population has an eating disorder syndrome. Another study conducted in the northern part of India revealed that there was a prevalence of 0.4% of Bulimia Nervosa in the population of that region (Nivedita, Sreenivasa, Sathyanarayana Rao, & Suttur, 2018).

Anorexia Nervosa patients display a great amount of difference between their current and ideal body along with body dissatisfaction and an inaccurate perception of their current body. Among adolescents, body dissatisfaction is considered to be a significant risk factor that may lead to the development of eating disturbances (Gruszka, Owkzarek & Glinianowicz 2022)

Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa are two eating disorders that are commonly found among young females. The reason for such prevalence is primarily psychosocial. The overemphasis on slimness is one of the major reasons for the commonality of eating disorders among western females. Although eating disorders are more commonly found in western nations, their occurrence is gradually increasing in the non-western regions as a result of the transformation of culture (Sharan & Sundar, 2015).

The subjective perception of stress is known as Perceived stress. Perceived stress can lead a person to indulge in eating behaviors that may be restrained, uncontrolled or emotional, especially with the kind of foods that are high on fat and sugar. An increase in perceived stress can lead to a subsequent increase in emotional eating, which ultimately has a negative impact on an individual's BMI (Du, Adjepong, Zan, Cho, Fenton, Hsiao, Keaver, Lee, Ludy, Shen, Swee, Thrivikraman, Agyei, Kanter, Wang & Tucker, 2022).

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Perceived stress has been found to be higher in obese individuals. There is a biological basis for the relationship between an increased amount of perceived stress and an increased consumption of food. The increase in cortisol levels is a part of the physiological stress reaction which further leads to the selection of those foods that have more calories in it. This is also one of the major reasons why people with obesity find it difficult to manage their weight effectively (Ziser, Finklenburg, Behrens, Giel, Becker, Skoda, Teufel, Mack, Zipfel & Junne, 2019)

Despite the increasing rate of prevalence, the area of eating disorders remains under reported and under researched. There is an increased need to make eating disorders a part of current health care research and policy planning due to reasons like higher mortality rates of eating disorders like Anorexia Nervosa as well as the increasing social and economical impact of eating disorders. Eating disorders are rarely found in the general population but the impact of such disorders on an individual level can be quite severe. The long term treatment of such disorders can be very expensive. The psychiatric and medical comorbidity rates of these disorders can be very high (Vaidyanathan, Kuppili & Menon 2019).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The following materials and Methods were used in order to develop an understanding as to how strongly are body dissatisfaction and perceived stress related to the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students.

Objectives:

1. To study the relationship between body dissatisfaction and the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students.
2. To study the relationship between perceived stress and the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students.

Hypotheses:

- **H1.** The higher the body dissatisfaction, the higher will be the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students.
- **H2.** The higher the level of perceived stress, the higher will be the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students.

Participants:

The sample consisted of (n=120) female college students studying in various streams in different. The sample was in the age range of 18 to 24 years. The researcher made use of snowball sampling for selecting the participants for collecting quantitative data. For the collection of qualitative data, the sample consisted of (n=12) female college students studying in different colleges. The researcher made use of purposive and convenience sampling to select participants for the qualitative interview.

Tools:

1. Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-16 b):

It was originally given in the year 1986 by Cooper P, J; Taylor M, J; Cooper, Z & Fairburn, C, G. It was modified by Evans and Dolan in order to create a shorter version that comprised of 16 questions. It makes use of a 6-Likert scale for answers (never, rarely, sometimes, often, very often and always). It helps to analyze the score of the extent to which an individual is concerned or dissatisfied with their body shape.

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- **Reliability:** The internal reliability for the modified BSQ-16 b ranges from .85 to .97.
- **Validity:** The convergent validity of BSQ-16 b ranges from .43 to .58.

2. SCOFF Questionnaire (Sick, Control, One, Fat, Food):

The SCOFF Questionnaire was developed by Morgan and colleagues in the year 1999. It is a screening tool that is used for the clarification of the suspicion that an eating disorder may exist in the individual. It is not used for making a diagnosis. It consists of five questions and each question has two answers, i.e., yes and no. The questionnaire can be administered either verbally or in a written form.

- **Reliability:** The overall Cronbach's Alpha for the test is 0.470 and the kappa scores range from 0.211 to 0.591.
- **Validity:** The validity of the SCOFF test is high with a sensitivity of 0.86 and a specificity of 0.83.

3. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS):

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Cohen et al in 1983. It is a commonly used psychological instrument that measures the perception of stress. It measures the degree to which an individual appraises the situations in their life as being stressful. The items of the test are used to uncover how much a person finds their life to be unpredictable, uncontrollable and overloaded. The scale has 10 items and each item has five options, i.e., never, almost never, sometimes, fairly often and very often.

- **Reliability:** The internal consistency reliability of the PSS is good, which is 0.79.
- **Validity:** The construct validity of the PSS is .579.

Interview questions for collecting qualitative data:

A semi-structured interview was conducted for the collection of qualitative data. The following questions will be used for conducting the interview:

1. How would you describe body dissatisfaction?
2. What do you think about your body?
3. Would you want to change something about your body? Why?
4. What were the factors that affected your perception of your body?
5. Have you tried anything to change the way you look?
6. Have you noticed any changes in your eating habits? How was it before?
7. How would you define stress?
8. What are the situations that make you feel stressed?
9. In what ways does your eating pattern change when you feel stressed?
10. What kinds of food do you usually consume when you are stressed?
11. What effect does it have on your stress?

Variables:

Body Dissatisfaction: It refers to the negative attitude one holds about their physical appearance. It is a result of the discrepancy between the actual body image (i.e., the actual physical appearance of the individual) and ideal body image (i.e., the desired state of the body).

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Perceived Stress: It refers to the feelings or thoughts that an individual experiences at a given point in time or over a given period of time with regard to the amount of stress that they are under.

Eating disorder: It refers to a pathological disturbance of attitudes and behaviors with regard to food like Anorexia nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating disorders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to investigate the relationship of body dissatisfaction and perceived stress with the risk of developing an eating disorder among female college students who fall in the age range of 18 to 24 years. In order to test the hypothesis of this research, the statistical analysis used were descriptive statistics analysis as well as Pearson's correlation.

Table no. 1 Showing Mean, Standard deviation and SEM (n=120).

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	SEM
Body Dissatisfaction	44.58	19.95	1.82
Perceived Stress	21.85	6.32	.57
Risk for developing an Eating disorder	1.62	1.22	.11

Table no. 2 Showing correlation of body dissatisfaction and perceived stress with the risk for developing an eating disorder (n=120)

		Body Dissatisfaction	Perceived Stress	Risk for developing an Eating disorder
Body Dissatisfaction	Pearson Correlation	1	.332**	.427**
Perceived Stress	Pearson Correlation		1	.269**
Risk for developing an Eating disorder	Pearson Correlation			1

The first hypothesis, H1, stating that, "The higher the body dissatisfaction, the higher will be the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students" has been accepted. The results (Table no. 2) show that body dissatisfaction is positively correlated with the risk for developing an eating disorder ($r = .427, P < 0.001$). Body dissatisfaction is a major risk factor for the development of eating pathology. An Initial level of increase in body dissatisfaction was a predictive factor for the subsequent increase in the overall symptoms of eating disorder (Stice & Shaw, 2002). The results can also be supported with the help of the social comparison theory by Festinger (1954). This theory states that people compare themselves to others in terms of many attributes as well as domains. This is so, because for many of these domains or attributes there is no objective yardstick available that can be used by people to evaluate themselves against. An upward social comparison is said to occur when a comparison is done by a person with someone who seems to be better than that person. This poses a threat to their self-image which in turn creates a desire in the individual to improve their own current status. Therefore, individuals who are dissatisfied with their bodies would be more prone to taking extreme measures like dietary restrictions

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and vomiting to improve their appearance, thereby increasing the risk for the development of an eating disorder in them.

The second hypothesis stating that, “The higher the level of perceived stress, the higher will be the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students” has been accepted. The results (Table no. 2) show that perceived stress has a significant positive correlation with the risk for developing an eating disorder ($r = .269, P < 0.001$). A significant correlation exists between perceived stress and eating behavior wherein some students may either approach food or avoid it based on the level of stress that they’re experiencing (Muhaimin, Puspitasari, Widiyaningsih & Hidayati, 2023). A research article published by Harvard Health publishing revealed that stress tends to have an effect on the kind of food people may prefer. They talked about various studies wherein it was proved that physical and emotional distress makes an individual more likely to consume foods high in sugar, fat and so on. In addition to this, the article also mentioned how stress experienced on a more short-term basis can reduce a person’s appetite. It happens due to the release of adrenaline that triggers the body’s fight-or-flight response, thus, reducing eating for some time.

According to the original theory of perceived stress by Cohen, stressors are not omnipresent life events that occur in an individual’s life, however, how the person reacts to them cognitively and emotionally plays an important role. An individual’s level of perceived stress depends on various factors like self-efficacy in terms of being able to meet the demands of the external environment, a sense of helplessness and experience of negative emotions. Therefore, it can be said that whenever the research participants experienced high perceived stress, their reaction to it was either indulging in emotional eating or avoiding food for the time being.

Table no. 3 Showing themes for the relationship between body dissatisfaction and the risk for developing an eating disorder (n=12)

Theme 1: Body dissatisfaction as a feeling	Theme 2: Negative perception of body due to constant comparison	Theme 3: Negative comments of relatives	Theme 4: Excessive diet and exercise	Theme 5: Changing specific body parts to look better
Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecurity • Lack of confidence • Thin ideal mismatch • Negative over thinking • Being uncomfortable 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of current body with past body • Comparison with other people’s body • Social media comparison • Fat shaming self • Finding flaws in body • Checking self in mirror • Old clothes no longer fitting 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the ‘fat’ term • Advise about eating less • Weight loss suggestions • Pointing out ‘too much’ food on plate • Pointing out to parents that daughter’s weight getting out of hand 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skipping meals • Portion sizes • Home cooked meals • No outside food • Going to gym • Exercising for an hour 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flat tummy • Narrow hips • Thinner thighs • Hourglass figure

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Table no. 4 Showing themes for the relationship between perceived stress and the risk for developing an eating disorder (n=12)

Theme 1: Stress as a feeling	Theme 2: Factors that lead to an increase in stress	Theme 3: Eating habits when under stress	Theme 4: Food cravings	Theme 5: Aftermath of stress eating
Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of control • Feeling confused • Overthinking • Experiencing • Physical symptoms like headaches 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam season • Being unable to complete work on time • Career planning • Declaration of exam results 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating less • Skipping meals • Overeating • A mix of overeating and skipping meals 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweet food • Savory food • Easy to access and prepare food 	Subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive feelings • Feeling calm & Satisfied • Temporary joy • Negative feelings • Guilt • Additional stress

Body image means different things for different individuals. For a lot of females the evaluation of their body is influenced by social ideals like being slim. It may also be influenced by other factors like the degree of happiness one feels with their body. Body image tends to fluctuate on a regular basis (Fogelkvist et al, 2016). The research participants in the present study described body dissatisfaction as a feeling resulting from their inability to fit into the society’s ideal thin body. The participants had a negative view of their body on an almost daily basis.

Female college students tend to compare themselves with other women on social media which led to an increase in negative thoughts and feelings about their own body. Such negative view about their bodies would result in various adverse outcomes for the students like disordered eating, increased anxiety and lower self confidence (Hill & Oz, 2024). In the present study, the participants would often compare themselves to models on Instagram thus, leading to a negative view and increased dissatisfaction with their own respective bodies.

A person’s satisfaction with their body can be influenced by the comments of their family regarding their body. Positive comments can a make a person feel good about their body, while negative comments can increase the level of body dissatisfaction experienced by a person (Diedrichs et al, 2011). In the present study, the research participants had mentioned how their dissatisfaction with their bodies began and would even increase whenever their relatives would pass subtle or obvious comments about their body shape or weight.

Females tend to use unhealthy methods of controlling their weight such as skipping meals, fasting or ‘crash’ dieting as a way of obtaining the ideal thin physique (Mooney et al, 2009). In the present study, the research participants had talked about trying out various kinds of diets, fasting or skipping meals as a means to see instant results of weight loss.

A small waist and flat stomach are part of the ideal body for female college students. The female students believed that having a body with such specific features would make them appear more attractive and desirable. This increased their concerns about their body weight and shape as well as played a role in increasing their disordered eating pattern (McComb & Mills, 2022). The participants in the present study had mentioned that an hourglass figure

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(flat stomach, less belly fat and slimmer waist) was the ideal body for them because it would enhance their appearance in the eyes of other people.

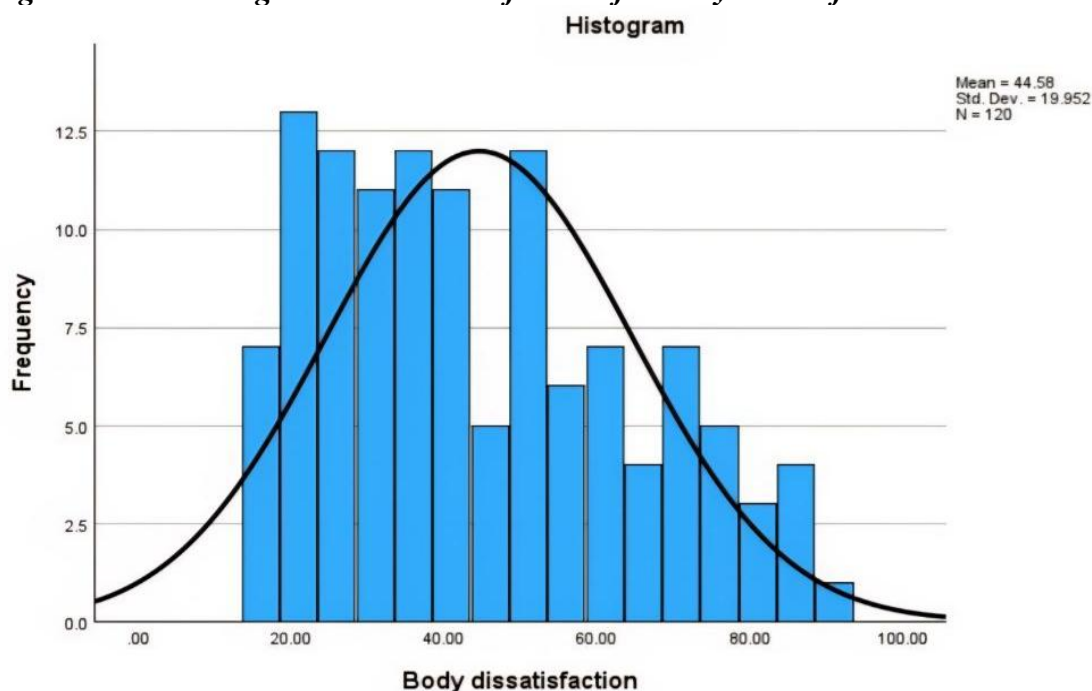
For students, things like grades, multi-tasking, time management and college work were the major stressors in their lives (Bland et al, 2010). In the present study, the participants mentioned that the major factors in their life that increased their stress were academics, exam results and assignments.

Higher levels of stress can lead to an increase or decrease in the amount of food consumed (Wardle & Steptoe, 2021). In the present study, the participants had mentioned that their food consumption pattern would change when they were stressed; it would either increase or decrease from the usual amount that they ate.

Stress also affects the kind of food consumed. Women tend to eat foods that are high in sugar and fat like fast food or snacks, whenever they are stressed (Conner et al, 1999). The participants in the present study had mentioned that whenever they were stressed they had a craving for foods that were high on sugar or fats like French fries, waffles, chocolate, chips and so on.

Participants had unpleasant feelings like guilt and shame as a result of emotional eating. Other participants however, felt pleasant after emotional eating and even considered it to be normal (Frayn et al, 2018). In the current study, the participants had mixed reactions to emotional eating; some felt satisfied after it while others experienced guilt, shame and additional stress.

Figure no. 1 showing the distribution of scores for Body dissatisfaction



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Figure no. 2 showing the distribution of scores for Perceived Stress

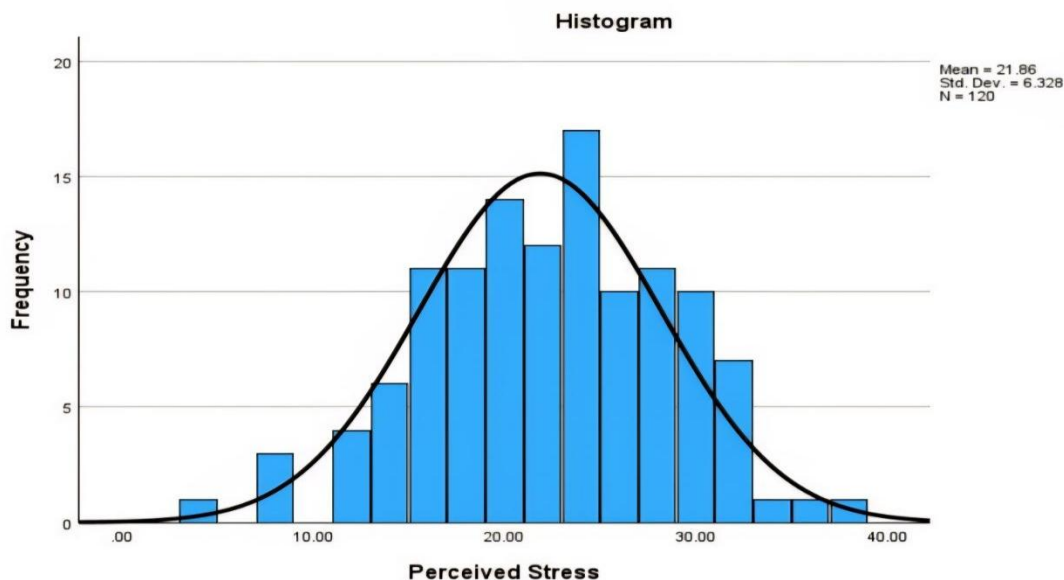
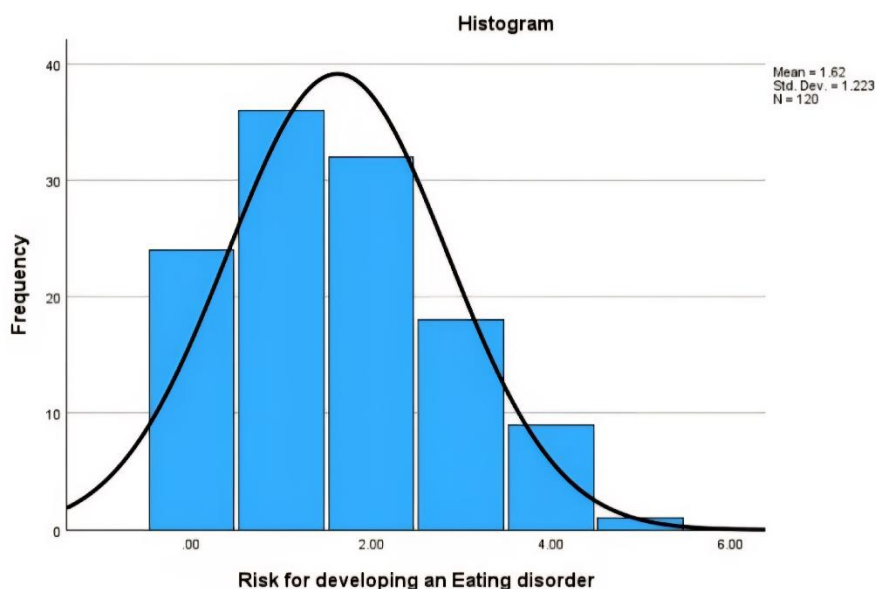


Figure no. 3 showing the distribution of scores for Risk for developing an Eating Disorder



CONCLUSIONS

1. Body dissatisfaction has a significant relationship with the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students.
2. Perceived stress has a significant relationship with the risk for developing an eating disorder among female college students.
3. Body dissatisfaction and perceived stress can increase due to various factors like social media exposure, negative comments by others about one's body, exams, academics and so on which in turn leads to unhealthy changes in the diet and other aspects of the lifestyle of female college students making them vulnerable to the development of an eating disorder.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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