

Busy tasks reduce thoughts about chocolate, even while hungry

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Finding a way to forget about that chocolate hiding away in the kitchen cupboard may not be as difficult as first thought, new research from University of Sussex psychologists has found.

Previous research has highlighted that 'distracted eating' can lead to over-eating. However, these studies, published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General and Appetite*, have found that whilst distracting tasks might be unhelpful during eating, tasks that demand attention might actually be helpful for the rest of the time, in terms of protecting us from cravings.

The work comprises two separate but similar studies, which is part of research undertaken as part of the Ph.D. research of Dr. Jenny Morris at the University of Sussex. Dr. Sophie Forster, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, who worked in collaboration on the study with Prof. Martin Yeomans, professor of experimental psychology, said:

"The idea is that we are applying a [theoretical framework](#), the Load Theory, that has been established within the area of attention research, to

a new area of eating behavior. Using this framework allows us to make predictions about when people are most vulnerable to triggers that can lead to overeating, and how to avoid this."

In the first study, participants were asked to take part in a visual search [task](#), in this case looking for letters amongst other letters, which was designed to place either high or low demands on attention.

During the task, images of appetitive food such as doughnuts and [chocolate](#) and non-[food items](#) such as office equipment, were flashed up in the periphery of the participants' vision. Researchers measured how distracted participants were by these images, in terms of the extent to which it slowed their reaction time.

The second study was made up of a single experiment in which participants were asked to hold a chocolate bar, and rate their liking, hunger and chocolate craving, before performing the same visual search task that they undertook in the first study. Participants were asked to press a button every time they caught themselves thinking about the chocolate. The researchers also used "thought probes" where participants were interrupted and asked whether they had been thinking of chocolate in that moment.

The results pointed toward some interesting conclusions.

In the first study, participants were less distracted by images of food, and less likely to remember food images, when these were presented during a task demanding more attention. Put simply, the chocolate bar peeking out of your drawer is less likely to catch your eye while you are doing an attention demanding task.

In the second study, whilst completing the more demanding task, people had less than half the amount of chocolate thoughts as was seen in the

less demanding task, and the relationship to hunger, chocolate liking and chocolate craving was eliminated. Again, put simply, even when you close the drawer so that you can't see the [chocolate bar](#), you may still find yourself thinking about it—but you are less likely to find yourself doing so during an attention demanding task.

Provided by University of Sussex

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