

Stress makes men appreciate heavier women: study

August 8 2012

(Phys.org) -- Increased stress in men is associated with a preference for heavier women, according to a study at Newcastle University.

The researchers, Dr Martin Tovee at Newcastle University (pictured) and Dr Viren Swami of the University of Westminster in London, compared how stressed and non-stressed men responded to pictures of female bodies varying from emaciated to obese. They found that the men who were stressed gave significantly higher ratings to the normal weight and overweight figures than the non-stressed group did.

Publishing in *PLoS ONE*, they also found that the stressed group generally had a broader range of figures they found attractive than the non-stressed group did.

Dr Tovee, a reader in Visual Cognition at Newcastle University said: “Our results show that there is a small but significant shift towards a preference for a heavier body with higher stress levels. You should clearly see a difference in the preferred partner! This shift in preferences suggests that stress alters what you find attractive in a potential partner.”

Work carried out previously has shown that in different parts of the world, in different environments people have different ideas of beauty.

Dr Tovee said: “Our work in parts of Malaysia and Africa has shown that in poorer environments where resources are scarce people prefer a

heavy body in a potential partner. If you live in an environment where food is scarce, being heavier means that you have fat stored up as a buffer against a potential reduction in food in the future and that you must be higher social status to afford the food in the first place. Both of these are attractive qualities in a partner in those circumstances.

“However, people moving from low resource environments to a higher resource environment, such as the UK or US, shift their preferences towards the preferences of people in their new environment. This suggests that our body size preferences are not innate but are flexible and can be changed by environment and circumstance.”

This research adds to our understanding of the factors shaping body preferences and is consistent with the idea that people idealize mature morphological traits, like heavier body size, when they experience an environmental threat such as stress.

“People suffering from conditions such as Anorexia Nervosa have a distorted perception of body size and body ideals,” adds Dr Tovee, “so it is important that research focuses on the mechanisms underlying and influencing the perception of body size.

“Understanding how stressful changing environmental conditions, such as rapid industrialisation in the developing world, may alter peoples’ body shape preferences and ideals may help us anticipate the health implications of these changes.”

More information: Swami V, Tovee MJ (2012) The Impact of Psychological Stress on Men's Judgements of Female Body Size. *PLOS ONE* 7(8): e42593. doi:10.1371/ journal.pone.0042593

Provided by Public Library of Science

Citation: Stress makes men appreciate heavier women: study (2012, August 8) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-stress-men-heavier-women.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.