

Based at the Department of Psychology at the University of Minho, Braga, Portugal, Dr Sofia Marques Ramalho is the winner of this year's EASO New Investigator Award in Child Obesity.

She currently works as a postdoctoral researcher exploring neurocognitive correlates of loss of control eating in adolescents with overweight/obesity and testing the effectiveness of a family Facebook-based intervention for this population. In 2016, she was invited to coordinate the Portuguese Young Obesity Researchers Group. Under her leadership, the group published a paper, organised awareness campaigns and scientific events (webinars/symposiums), one of which had international funding from EASO (2020 World Obesity Day).

Q: Congratulations on receiving this award Sofia. How did you feel when you were told the news?

A: Many thanks. I was truly thrilled with this prestigious award and with the acknowledgment of my research work in exploring new ways of improving the treatment as usual for paediatric obesity in public health care facilities.

Q: As part of your research, you demonstrated for the first time through a multicentre-RCT that a Facebook-based intervention (APOLO-Teens) designed to complement treatment as usual for paediatric obesity in hospital settings was feasible/effective in enhancing adolescent's healthy eating habits/behaviours. What were some of the key findings from this study, and was it an easy intervention to implement?

A: Particularly, the APOLO-Teens intervention group showed a significant increase on fruit consumption per week. On average, the APOLO-Teens group increased fruit consumption from 5 to 6 times per week to consume about two pieces of fruit per day at the end of the intervention. We also observed that a high adherence to the APOLO-Teens intervention was linked to better outcomes at the end of intervention when compared with treatment as usual regarding fruit, vegetables consumption, but also they showed reduced depressive symptomatology and less problematic eating behaviours, such as fear of getting fat and grazing eating pattern. On the whole, the APOLO-Teens intervention was feasible and participants reported great satisfaction with this intervention modality. Nevertheless, chat sessions in Facebook had low adherence and participants say they would prefer a shorter intervention (less than 6 months).

Q: One of your other studies looked at the link between eating behaviours and obesity by identifying maternal eating behaviour profiles in children undergoing weight-loss treatment. You found that certain eating profiles in mothers were associated with problematic eating behaviours in the children. What kind of eating profiles were you seeing in the mothers and children?

A: Three distinctive disordered eating profiles of mothers were found. The Disordered Eating profile of mothers with the highest scores on the emotional eating and uncontrolled eating dimensions, the Restraint Eating profile including mothers scoring high in cognitive restraint, and the Low Disordered Eating profile where mothers scored low in all the disordered eating dimensions. These profiles seemed to be associated with specific problematic eating behaviours of children undergoing hospital weight-loss treatment. For instance, children of mothers in the Disordered Eating profile had significantly higher emotional overeating than children of mothers in the other two profiles.

Q: You have done research on the COVID-19 pandemic, more specifically the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on disordered eating behaviours and the mediation role of psychological distress. What were the main findings of this research?

A: The results of this study showed that the change imposed by the psychosocial impact of a first COVID-19 lockdown on disordered eating behaviours (uncontrolled and emotional eating) was significantly associated with psychological distress (stress, anxiety, and depressive symptomatology). The findings highlighted the importance of creating a groundwork for future situations involving lockdown/social isolation and of designing interventions to mitigate the short- and long-term consequences of COVID-19 pandemic on eating behaviours/disorders.

Q: What are some of the other studies you are working, and also would like to work on in the future?

A: Currently, I am working in a research project where we are exploring neurocognitive correlates of problematic eating behaviours in children and adolescents with obesity and testing the feasibility of APOLO-teens as a Family Facebook-based intervention for this population. In the future, I would like to become a Principal Investigator in the area of childhood obesity and eating behaviours.

Q: Can you tell us a little about your life outside work. What are your hobbies, and how have you adapted your life to the realities of the pandemic?

A: Nowadays, in my free time, I like to do exercise outside and yoga. I also love reading because I can enter other worlds and meet amazing characters. When I have the time, I like to take photographs and cooking.

Thanks Sofia and enjoy the rest of the congress!