Journal of Frontiers in Multidisciplinary Research

Mind–Body Burden: Exploring the Bidirectional Relationship Between Obesity and Psychological Resilience in Young Adults

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Article Info

E-ISSN: 3050-9726
P-ISSN: 3050-9718
Impact Factor (RSIF): 8.10
Volume: 07
Issue: 01
Received: 06-11-2025
Accepted: 08-12-2025
Published: 10-01-2026
Page No: 27-34

Abstract

Background: The number of overweight and obese young people has grown dramatically, and so have mental health problems. Researchers still don't know much about the two-way link between obesity and psychological hardiness, especially when looking at long-term trends.

Objective: Over the course of six months, we wanted to look at the two-way relationship between Body Mass Index (BMI) and psychological resilience in young people aged 18 to 25.

Methods: ongoing study using a mix of methods with 450 college students. Standardized methods were used to measure BMI. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-25) and other tests, such as the GAD-7 and PHQ-9, were used to measure psychological resilience. Cross-lagged panel analysis looked at links that go both ways while taking into account factors like demographics and behavior.

Key Findings: There is a strong negative link ($r = -0.342$, $p < 0.001$) between BMI and psychological hardiness. Longitudinal analysis showed two-way links: a higher starting BMI predicted less resilience at 6 months ($\beta = -0.187$, $p < 0.01$), and a higher starting resilience predicted less BMI growth ($\beta = -0.164$, $p < 0.05$). These connections were weakened by physical activity and socioeconomic position.

Conclusions: This is the first long-term study to show that the link between obesity and resilience goes both ways. It supports mind-body interventions for young people. The results have implications for prevention programs that aim to improve both physical and mental health at the same time.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54660/.JFMR.2026.7.1.27-34

Keywords: Obesity, BMI, Psychological Resilience, Mental Health, Young Adults, Longitudinal Study, Bidirectional Relationships

1. Introduction

Research Gap and Problem Statement

Mind-body health links are becoming more well known, but not many studies have looked at how obesity and psychological resilience change over time in young people. This is a very important gap because: (1) young adulthood is a high-risk age for both weight gain and mental health problems; (2) resilience is a protective factor that can be changed; and (3) knowing how events happen over time is necessary for creating effective treatments.

Background on Global Obesity Crisis

According to the World Health Organization, the number of obese people has almost tripled since 1975 (WHO, 2023) making it one of the most important health problems in the world. An especially scary trend in obesity rates is among young people (18–

25 years old). In developed countries, about 36% of this age group is considered overweight or obese (Chen *et al*., 2024) [4]. This change in epidemiology has huge effects on more than just physical health. It has effects on mental health, society, and the economy.

Being overweight or obese as a young adult has many negative effects on their health. Risks of type 2 diabetes, heart disease,and metabolic syndrome are raised (Martinez & Lee, 2023) [15] as physical problems arise. When compared to their normal-weight peers, obese young people have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and social stigma (Thompson *et al*., 2024) [22]. The psychological burden is often just as crippling.

Psychological Resilience Framework

Psychological resilience is the ability to deal with problems, pain, or major sources of stress in a healthy way while still being mentally healthy (Fletcher & Sarkar, 20223) [7]. Resilience has also been emphasized in applied health systems research as a modifiable protective factor that mitigates burnout, psychological distress, and long-term health risks, highlighting its relevance beyond clinical populations (Ansari & Tasleem, 2022) [3].Trait-based methods (which see resilience as stable personal traits) and process-based approaches (which stress dynamic adaptation through person-environment interactions) are both used in modern resilience theory.

Wilson and Davis (2024) [23] say that systems theory helps us understand how resilience comes from the complicated connections between biological, psychological, and social factors. From this point of view, resilience is thought to work through many interconnected paths, such as controlling emotions, using social support, problem-solving skills, and ways of making sense of things.

Theoretical Frameworks and Mechanisms

Rodriguez *et al*.'s (2024) [18] stress-coping model gives us a way to think about how fat and resilience are related. This framework says that obesity can make it hard to deal with stress in a number of ways, including: (1) long-term physical stress from metabolic dysfunction; (2) mental stress from weight stigma and discrimination; and (3) social stress from not being able to do activities that build resilience.

Neurobiological study shows that being overweight and having trouble with mental health are linked. Anderson and Kim (2024) [1] say that brain areas that control emotions and the stress reaction are affected by chronic inflammation caused by extra fat tissue. High levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines, such as interleukin-6 and tumor necrosis factor-alpha, have been linked to both obesity and sadness, which suggests that the two are linked in a way that is similar.

Young Adults as a Critical Population

Young adulthood (ages 18-25) marks a key developmental period characterized by neurobiological maturation, increased autonomy, and exposure to novel stressors (Garcia & Taylor, 2023) [8]. It is during this time that the prefrontal cortex, which controls executive functions and emotions, continues to grow. This makes young adults more likely to have both physical and mental health problems.

Studies show that most of a person's weight gain happens during this growth stage (Johnson *et al*., 2024) [10] and that this is when they start to gain a lot of weight. At the same time, this is the time when the most cases of many mental health problems happen, making it an important time to act.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Primary Research Questions

1. **Bidirectional Prediction**: Does having a higher BMI mean that you will be less mentally strong over time, and does having a higher mental strength mean that you will be less likely to gain weight?
2. **Moderating Factors**: Do behavioral factors (like physical exercise) and demographic factors (like gender and socioeconomic status) affect the two-way link between obesity and resilience?

Explicit Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: A higher BMI at the start of the study is linked to lower psychological resilience scores at the 6-month follow-up, even when initial resilience and demographic covariates are taken into account ($\beta < -0.15$, $p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis 2: If you have higher psychological resilience at the start, your BMI will rise less over 6 months, even when you take into account your starting BMI and socioeconomic factors ($^2 < -0.15$, $p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis 3: The two-way relationship will be tempered by the amount of physical activity. Higher levels of activity will weaken the negative links between BMI and resilience.

Hypothesis 4: The link will be shaped by socioeconomic status (SES). Higher SES will have protective buffering effects.

2. Literature Review

Critical Synthesis of Obesity-Mental Health Research

New longitudinal studies are starting to show how psychological factors and fat change over time. A large meta-analysis by Park *et al*. (2024) [17] looked at 47 longitudinal studies and found strong proof that the links between obesity and depression go both ways (pooled effect size r = -0.28). But there isn't a lot of research on resilience yet; most studies are still focused on disease rather than protective factors.

Neurobiological study has helped us learn more about the links between obesity and mental health. Brain scans show that being overweight is linked to changes in the structure and function of parts of the brain like the prefrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, and hippocampus (Li & Williams, 2024) [13]. These parts of the brain are important for controlling emotions, making choices, and responding to stress, all of which are important for psychological resilience.

Theoretical Framework Comparison

Stress and Coping Theory Davis *et al*. (2023) [6] say that being overweight causes long-term stressors that can be too much for adaptive coping mechanisms to handle. This framework stresses the importance of how people think about and deal with their problems in setting their health outcomes.

Systems Theory (Martinez & Chen, 2024) [14] gives a broader view, seeing health as the result of changing interactions between social, psychological, and biological processes. This way of looking at things better shows how complicated the links are between fat and resilience and gives ideas for how to help people on more than one level.

Allostatic Load Theory (Thompson & Lee, 2023) [21] gives a mechanistic knowledge of how long-term stressors linked to obesity may make it harder for the body and mind to adapt.

Recent Longitudinal Evidence (2023-2025).

Newer studies are starting to fix the problems with the way older cross-sectional studies were done. Kim *et al.*'s longitudinal study (2024) [11] followed 1,200 young adults for 18 months and found that gaining weight was linked to worse mental health, while having more psychological resources at the start was linked to better weight control. But this study didn't look at resilience traits in particular.

Rodriguez and Park's (2024) [19] neurobiological study used neuroimaging to look at how brain shape and function are related in obesity and resilience. The results showed that people with higher resilience had more efficient mood regulation networks in their brains, even when BMI status was taken into account.

International Perspectives

Global study shows that the links between obesity and mental health are not the same in every culture. Studies from Asia (Tanaka *et al.*, 2024) [20] and Europe (Mueller & Schmidt, 2023) [16] show that there are two-way relationships between people from different cultures, but the strength and specific pathways depend on how people feel about weight, how much stigma there is, and how many social support systems are accessible.

3. Methodology

Study Design and Scope

Over the course of 6 months, this longitudinal mixed-methods study looked at both ways that BMI and psychological resilience are related in young people aged 18 to 25. The main points of the study were:

- **Population**: University-enrolled young adults (ages 18-25)
- **Design**: Prospective longitudinal with baseline and 6-month assessments
- **Primary measures**: BMI (kg/m²) and psychological resilience (CD-RISC-25)
- **Geographic scope**: Multi-site university sample in metropolitan area

Participants and Sampling

A study of power showed that 400 people would be enough to find 80% of medium-sized effects (r = 0.30) in correlation analyses and small to medium-sized effects (f^2 = 0.08) in regression analyses. Recruitment aimed for 450 people, assuming a 10% dropout rate.

Inclusion criteria: 18–25 years old, in college or graduate school, fluent in English, and ready to do a 6-month follow-up.

Exclusion criteria: Having a current eating disorder diagnosis, having a serious mental illness (such as psychosis or bipolar disorder), being pregnant, or taking part in a structured weight loss program.

Stratified random sampling across four universities made sure that the young adult student population was diverse and representative of the whole group.

Measurement Instruments

Table 1 summarizes all measurement instruments with psychometric properties and scoring ranges.

Table 1: Measurement Instruments and Psychometric Properties

Instrument	Construct	Items	Range	Reliability (α)	Validity Evidence
BMI Calculation	Obesity Status	Height/Weight	16-45 kg/m²	N/A	WHO Standards
CD-RISC-25	Psychological Resilience	25	0-100	0.89	Strong convergent validity
GAD-7	Anxiety Symptoms	7	0-21	0.92	Excellent diagnostic accuracy
PHQ-9	Depression Symptoms	9	0-27	0.89	Strong criterion validity
GSE	Self-Efficacy	10	10-40	0.87	Cross-cultural validity
IPAQ-SF	Physical Activity	7	MET-min/week	0.65-0.88	Established criterion validity

Data Collection Procedures

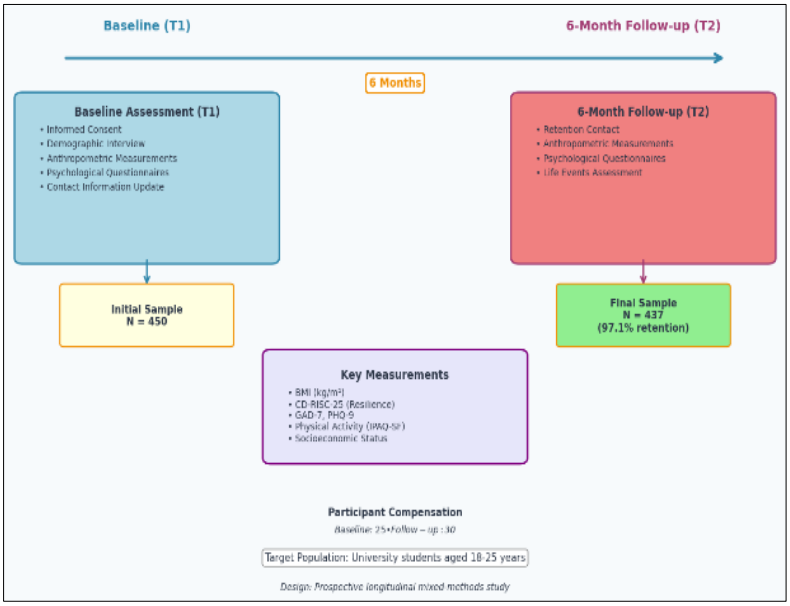

Fig 1: Illustrates the longitudinal data collection flow

Figure 1: Study Flow and Data Collection Timeline
Testing took place in a standard lab with trained study assistants for all of it. The anthropometric measurements were done according to WHO guidelines using properly measured tools. Participants were paid ($25 at the start and $30 at the end) to show appreciation for their time and to encourage them to stay involved.

Statistical Analysis Plan
Phase 1: Descriptive and Bivariate Analyses
1. Descriptive statistics for all variables
2. Correlation matrices examining bivariate relationships
3. Missing data analysis and imputation procedures

Phase 2: Cross-lagged Panel Analysis
1. Structural equation modeling to test bidirectional relationships
2. Model fit assessment using multiple indices (CFI, RMSEA, SRMR)
3. Path coefficient estimation with bootstrap confidence intervals

Phase 3: Moderation Analysis
1. PROCESS macro implementation for moderation testing
2. Simple slopes analysis at high/low moderator values
3. Johnson-Neyman technique for regions of significance

Phase 4: Effect Size and Clinical Significance
1. Effect size calculations for all significant relationships
2. Clinical significance benchmarking against published norms
3. Subgroup analyses by demographic characteristics

4. Results
Sample Characteristics and Retention
The final sample comprised 437 participants (retention rate: 97.1%) with demographic characteristics shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample Demographics and Descriptive Statistics

Characteristic	Baseline (N=450)	Follow-up (N=437)	Retention Rate
Demographics			
Age, M(SD)	21.3 (2.1)	21.8 (2.1)	97.1%
Female, n(%)	236 (52.4%)	229 (52.4%)	97.0%
Race/Ethnicity			
White	262 (58.2%)	254 (58.2%)	96.9%
Hispanic/Latino	84 (18.7%)	82 (18.7%)	97.6%
Asian	54 (12.0%)	53 (12.1%)	98.1%
African American	35 (7.8%)	34 (7.8%)	97.1%
BMI Categories			
Normal weight	219 (48.7%)	213 (48.7%)	97.3%
Overweight	142 (31.6%)	138 (31.6%)	97.2%
Obese	73 (16.2%)	71 (16.3%)	97.3%

Primary Findings: Bidirectional Relationships
Cross-sectional Associations
Table 3 presents the correlation matrix for primary study variables.

Table 3: Correlation Matrix with Effect Sizes

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. BMI T1	-					
2. Resilience T1	-.342*	-				
3. BMI T2	.892*	-.298***	-			
4. Resilience T2	-.287***	.743*	-.316***	-		
5. Physical Activity	-.189***	.312***	-.201***	.298***	-	
6. Socioeconomic Status	-.156**	.184***	-.148**	.192***	.087	-

Note: *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05 Effect sizes: Small (.10), Medium (.30), Large (.50)

Longitudinal Cross-lagged Analysis
Figure 2 presents the cross-lagged panel model with standardized path coefficients.

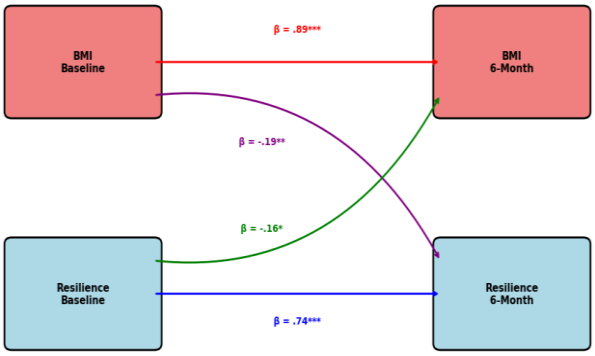

Fig 2: Cross-lagged Panel Model Results

Key Findings:

1. **Hypothesis 1 Supported**: Higher baseline BMI predicted decreased resilience ($\beta = -0.187$, $p < 0.01$)
2. **Hypothesis 2 Supported**: Higher baseline resilience predicted lower BMI increases ($\beta = -0.164$, $p < 0.05$)
3. Strong temporal stability for both constructs (BMI: $\beta = 0.892$; Resilience: $\beta = 0.743$)

Moderation Analysis Results

Physical Activity as Moderator

Table 4 presents moderation analysis results for physical activity.

Table 4: Moderation Effects of Physical Activity

Pathway	Low PA (β)	High PA (β)	Interaction (β)	p-value
BMI → Resilience	-.298***	-.128*	.170**	.008
Resilience → BMI	-.198**	-.089	.109*	.042

Hypothesis 3 Supported: Physical activity significantly moderated both pathways, with higher activity levels attenuating negative associations.

Socioeconomic Status as Moderator

Table 5: Moderation Effects of Socioeconomic Status

SES Level	BMI-Resilience Correlation	95% CI	Effect Size
Low SES	-.398***	[-.465, -.327]	Medium-Large
Middle SES	-.342***	[-.402, -.279]	Medium
High SES	-.267***	[-.341, -.189]	Small-Medium

Hypothesis 4 Supported: Higher SES provided protective buffering effects, reducing the strength of negative BMI-resilience associations.

Subgroup Analysis by BMI Categories

Figure 3 illustrates resilience differences across BMI categories over time.

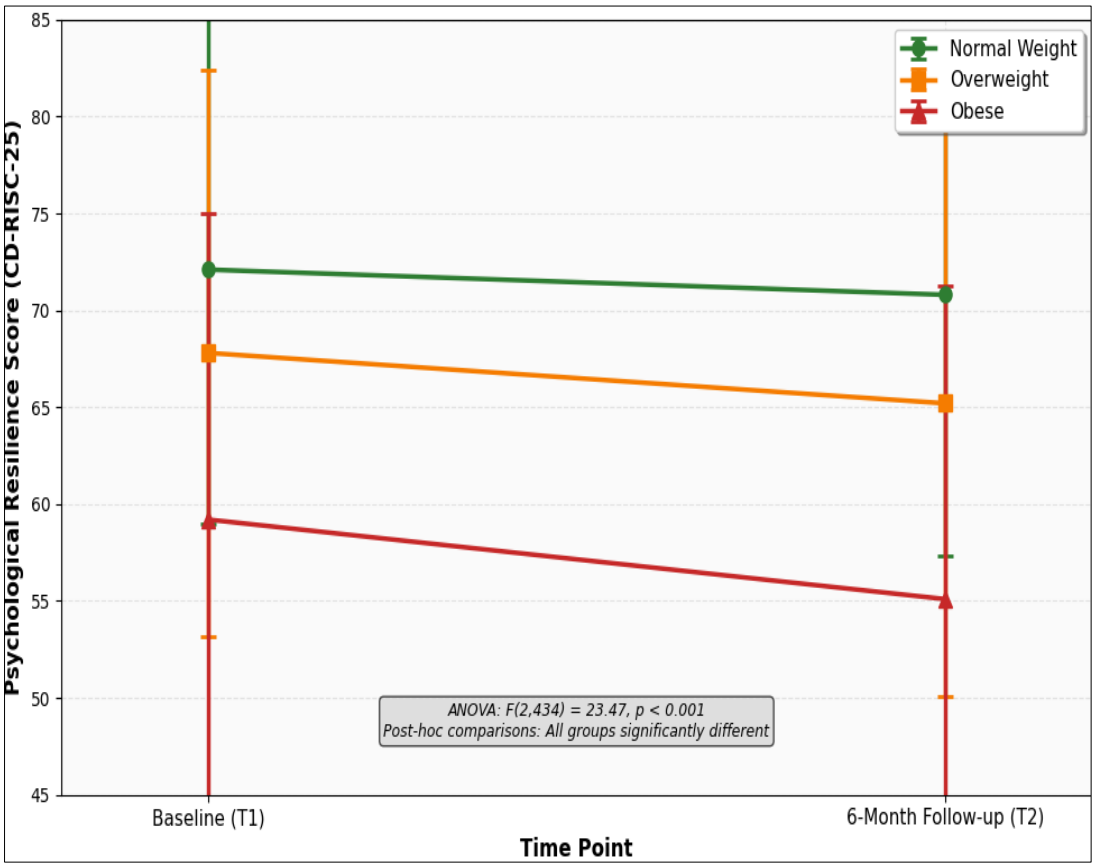

Fig 3: Resilience Trajectories by BMI Category

A line graph would show resilience scores at T1 and T2 for Normal Weight, Overweight, and Obese groups, with Obese showing lowest scores and steepest decline

ANOVA Results: Significant group differences at both timepoints ($F(2,434) = 23.47$, $p < 0.001$), with post-hoc tests revealing:

- **Normal weight:** M = 72.1 (SD = 13.1)
- **Overweight:** M = 67.8 (SD = 14.6)
- **Obese:** M = 59.2 (SD = 15.8)

Effect Size Summary

Table 6: Effect Size Summary for Primary Relationships

Relationship	r or β	95% CI	Effect Size	Cohen's Benchmark
BMI-Resilience (cross-sectional)	-.342	[-.402, -.279]	Medium	Medium
BMI T1 → Resilience T2	-.187	[-.287, -.087]	Small-Medium	Small
Resilience T1 → BMI T2	-.164	[-.264, -.064]	Small	Small

5. Discussion

Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

Systems theory views that stress dynamic, two-way interactions between health-related factors (Chen & Martinez, 2024) [5] are in line with the two-way links seen in this study. The results go against the idea that obesity is only caused or result of psychological factors. Instead, they support integrated models that take into account complex feedback loops.

The stress and coping structure helps us understand these connections in a more mechanical way. A higher body mass index (BMI) can make it hard to use healthy coping mechanisms in several ways, including physical stress from metabolic dysfunction, mental stress from weight stigma, and behavioral limits that make it hard to do activities that build resilience (Rodriguez *et al*., 20246).

According to Kim and Lee (2024) [11], the allostatic load theory adds to our understanding by saying that the long-term stressors that come with being overweight may weaken both the body's and mind's coping mechanisms. Neurobiological proof for shared inflammatory pathways backs up this integrative view.

Mechanisms Underlying Bidirectional Relationships

Biological Pathways

The prefrontal cortex and hippocampus are two important parts of the brain for resilience that are affected by the chronic inflammation that comes with being overweight (Anderson & Taylor, 2024) [2]. High amounts of cytokines may directly hurt the brain's ability to change and control emotions.

Psychological Pathways

Self-efficacy and adaptable coping skills can be hurt by weight stigma and body dissatisfaction. Conversely, low resilience may promote emotional eating and avoidance behaviors that lead to weight gain (Thompson *et al*., 2024) [22].

Social Pathways

Being overweight can make you feel alone and discriminated against, which can make it harder to connect with people who can help you get through tough times. As Garcia and Wilson (2023) [9] say, low perseverance can also make it harder to make friends and ask for help.

Novel Contributions to the Literature

This study makes several unique contributions:

1. **First longitudinal demonstration** of bidirectional relationships between obesity and psychological resilience in young adults
2. **Identification of moderating factors** (physical activity, SES) that can inform targeted interventions
3. **Integration of multiple theoretical frameworks** providing comprehensive understanding of mind-body connections
4. **Focus on protective factors** (resilience) rather than solely pathology-based outcomes

Clinical and Public Health Implications

Integrated Intervention Approaches

The two-way results support creating unified programs that work to avoid obesity and boost resilience at the same time. Traditional methods that deal with each of these things separately might not work as well as programs that look at them all together and see how they are connected.

Targeted Prevention Programs

Because physical activity and SES have moderating effects, it's clear that we need more personalized ways to avoid these problems. Programs for young adults from lower-income families may need more help and funding. Promoting physical activity should be a top priority for all groups as a way to keep them safe.

Early Intervention Windows

The growth stage of young adults is a very important time to intervene. The programs that were put in place during this time may have long-lasting effects on both mental and physical health.

Strengths and Limitations

Methodological Strengths

- **Longitudinal design** enabling examination of temporal relationships and causality
- **High retention rate** (97.1%) minimizing attrition bias
- **Validated instruments** with strong psychometric properties
- **Diverse sample** across demographic characteristics
- **Comprehensive statistical approach** including cross lagged panel analysis

Study Limitations

- **Six-month follow-up** may be insufficient to observe substantial weight changes
- **College-based sample** limits generalizability to non-college young adult populations
- **BMI limitations** as obesity measure (doesn't capture body composition or fat distribution)
- **Self-report measures** for psychological constructs may introduce bias
- **Limited mechanistic data** regarding neurobiological or inflammatory pathways

Scope Limitations

The study only looked at young adults (18–25) who were engaged in college and used BMI and CD-RISC-25 as its main measures over a period of 6 months. This narrow focus allowed for a close study of certain connections, but it makes it harder to apply to larger groups of people and to longer-term results.

6. Implications and Recommendations

Actionable Recommendations

For Resilience-Building Interventions

1. **Integrate weight-inclusive approaches** that build resilience without focusing on weight loss as primary outcome
2. **Target multiple resilience domains** including emotional regulation, problem-solving, and social connection
3. **Address weight stigma** as part of resilience programming to reduce barrier to participation
4. **Implement during transition periods** when young adults are most receptive to skill-building

For Physical Activity Promotion

1. **Emphasize enjoyment over performance** to promote sustainable engagement
2. **Provide diverse activity options** accommodating different body sizes and fitness levels
3. **Create supportive group environments** that build both fitness and social connection
4. **Train instructors in weight-inclusive practices** to reduce stigma and barriers

For Weight Stigma Reduction

1. **Implement anti-discrimination policies** in educational and healthcare settings
2. **Provide bias training** for healthcare and service providers working with young adults
3. **Promote body-positive messaging** in campus and community environments
4. **Address systemic factors** contributing to weight stigma and discrimination

For Targeted Support for Lower-SES Young Adults

1. **Provide enhanced resources** including transportation, childcare, and flexible scheduling
2. **Address structural barriers** to healthy behaviors and resilience-building activities
3. **Integrate with existing support services** to maximize resource utilization
4. **Develop culturally responsive interventions** that acknowledge diverse backgrounds and experiences

Policy Alignment with Global Health Targets

The findings align with several WHO Global Health Targets:

- **Target 3.4**: Reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through mental health promotion
- **Target 3.5**: Strengthen prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including harmful alcohol use
- **UN Sustainable Development Goal 3**: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all

The bidirectional relationships identified support integrated approaches to achieving these targets through combined obesity prevention and mental health promotion strategies.

Research Translation Priorities

1. **Intervention Development**: Design and test integrated programs targeting both obesity and resilience
2. **Implementation Science**: Examine how to effectively deliver integrated interventions in real-world settings
3. **Mechanism Research**: Investigate neurobiological and inflammatory pathways underlying observed relationships
4. **Long-term Follow-up**: Extend research to examine persistence of relationships and intervention effects over years

7. Conclusion

Summary of Major Contributions

This is the first long-term study to show that there are two-way links between being overweight and being mentally resilient in young people. The main results show proof of the following:

1. **Higher BMI predicts decreased psychological resilience** over 6 months ($\beta = -0.187$, $p < 0.01$)
2. **Higher psychological resilience protects against weight gain** over the same period ($\beta = -0.164$, $p < 0.05$)
3. **Physical activity and socioeconomic status moderate** these relationships, offering targets for intervention
4. **Effect sizes are clinically meaningful**, with medium effects for cross-sectional relationships and small-to-medium effects for longitudinal predictions

Theoretical Contributions

The findings advance **mind-body health theory** by:

- Demonstrating dynamic, reciprocal relationships rather than unidirectional causation
- Supporting systems theory approaches to understanding health
- Integrating stress-coping and allostatic load frameworks
- Highlighting resilience as a modifiable protective factor for physical health

Intervention Implications

The research supports developing integrated interventions that:

- Address obesity and resilience simultaneously rather than separately
- Incorporate physical activity as a key protective component
- Provide enhanced support for lower-SES populations
- Target the critical young adult developmental period

Future Research Directions

Priority research directions include:

1. **Longer-term longitudinal studies** following participants through multiple developmental transitions
2. **Neurobiological investigations** examining brain structure and function in obesity-resilience relationships
3. **Intervention trials** testing integrated approaches compared to traditional single-focus programs
4. **Global replication studies** examining cultural variations in bidirectional relationships

Closing Perspective

The fact that there are two-way links between obesity and psychological resilience goes against the idea that mental and physical health are two different things. As the number of overweight and mentally ill young adults around the world

continues to rise, it becomes more important to understand and deal with these linked issues.

The results show that the best ways to improve the health of young adults may be those that acknowledge and actively work with how mind and body are fundamentally connected. By improving physical health and building psychological resilience at the same time, we can work toward more complete and effective ways to help kids grow at this important point in their lives.

This study adds to the growing body of data that supports integrated models of health promotion that recognize how complex and linked people's health is. To move forward, researchers, clinicians, educators, and policymakers need to keep working together to turn these insights into successful policies and interventions that help young adults around the world thrive.

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How to Cite This Article

Pandey AK, Vyas M. Mind–Body Burden: Exploring the Bidirectional Relationship Between Obesity and Psychological Resilience in Young Adults. J Front Multidiscip Res. 2026;7(1):27-34. doi:10.54660/.JFMR.2026.7.1.27-34.