

**Soothe Yourself Without Food:  
Helping Clients End Emotional Eating  
In 3 Easy Steps**

**By Dr. Susan Albers**

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## Soothe Yourself Without Food: Helping Clients End Emotional Eating In 3 Easy Steps

Hello,

I'm Dr. Susan Albers, a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic and *New York Times* bestselling author of seven books on emotional eating including *EatQ*, *Eating Mindfully*, and *50 Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*. For over fifteen years, I've been helping people eat more mindfully and get out of the emotional eating cycle. If you've opened this guide, it's likely that you have patients or clients who come into your office every single day asking, "How can I stop emotional eating?" This is a great question! The issue is more complex than one might think. A client may wish to disengage from emotional eating and recognize it is a problem but not be able to stop it.

This guide will walk you through three easy steps to help clients end emotional eating. It is based on the suggestions in my new book *50 More Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*—the sequel to *50 Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*, which has become a bestseller and a phenomenal tool that mental health professionals, physicians, and dietitians use to teach clients how to cope with emotional eating.

As you know, the process of stopping comfort eating doesn't happen overnight. But the good news is that with practice, your clients can develop new skills to stop feeding their feelings with food. The skills outlined in this manual are grounded in clinical research.

My goal is to provide you with some simple tools that clients can use at home. There is no need for you to spend time creating these tools when they have been done for you! I'd also like to take a moment to thank YOU for the hard work you do helping people to change their eating habits. You provide a life-changing service that increases healthy and happiness and radically improves the quality of your client's day-to-day life!

If you have questions about this guide, please feel free to contact me at [DrAlbers@eatingmindfully.com](mailto:DrAlbers@eatingmindfully.com). And for a FREE download of motivational quotes for mindful eating, visit: <http://www.eatingmindfully.com/motivation>.

Sincerely,

Susan Albers, PsyD

## Remember This Acronym: TAP

I chose the word “tap” because I believe emotional eating taps into something much deeper than the surface level of eating. If you look at emotional eating as simply a problem of overeating, you will be missing a lot!

**Step One: Teach** your clients the basics of emotional eating. Just knowing how emotional eating works can do a lot to helping clients unravel their food-mood connection.

**Step Two: Awareness** of habits and triggers.

**Step Three: Pursue** healthy alternatives to eating.

## Step 1: Teach

Your first task as a mental health professional is to educate your clients on what emotional eating is. Give your clients the four handouts and checklist on emotional eating included in this guide.

### Handouts:

1. **Emotional Eating Checklist:** Ask your client to complete this checklist. This will help clarify for your client whether they are engaging in emotional eating.
2. **What You Should Know About Emotional Eating:** This worksheet will dispel some of myths about emotional eating.
3. **Emotional Eating Cycle:** Talk to your clients about how this cycle specifically plays out for them on a day-to-day basis.
4. **Emotional vs. Physical Hunger:** Clients often lose track of what physical hunger feels like. Begin by outlining the difference between emotional hunger cues and physical hunger cues.
5. **Emotional vs. Physical Hunger: Four Ways to Tell the Difference.** Your clients can ask themselves these four questions to determine if they are emotionally or physically hungry.

## Step 2: Awareness

Awareness is not about changing the behavior. Instead, it is getting to know the *what, who, when, and why* a person is emotionally eating. Once you get to know your habits, you can start to anticipate them and work with them. Ask your client to track their emotional eating habits for just one week. Review this list of triggers with them.

### Handout:

**Emotional Eating Trigger Tracker:** This handout will help your clients to identify the situations, emotions, and thoughts that prompt comfort eating.

## Step 3: Pursue Other Activities

Once you recognize the urge to emotionally eat, the next step is to take action. This part can be tricky for many clients. In *50 Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*, I walk people through simple instructions for doing a number of alternatives: self-talk, mindful meditation, distraction, and so on. As a mental health professional, it's likely that you already have many ideas and knowledge of these topics. Go through this list with your clients. You can use the bingo board in this guide. Or, you can help your client create their own list of alternatives that may work for them. You may want to help them choose some alternatives strategies that are calming and some that are energizing. You can also help your clients to pair them with other methods that they know to work.

### Handouts:

**Soothe and Comfort Bingo (suggestions).** This bingo board gives your clients suggestions of healthy alternatives to emotional eating based on their mood.

**Soothe and Comfort Bingo (blank).** This is a blank board to help you brainstorm with your client to identify which healthy activities work best to deter emotional eating.

# What You Should Know About Emotional Eating

- 75% of all overeating is triggered by emotions, not hunger
- Emotional eaters come in all shapes and sizes, and emotional eating impacts men and women of all races and ethnicities.
- Eating triggers feel-good chemicals in your brain. This is one reason why it can be experienced as so comforting.
- Media and ads push emotional eating. (Think about chocolate ads that promise you bliss when you eat it.)
- Positive *and* negative feelings can trigger emotional eating. It's a myth that it's only negative feelings that do! Emotional eating can make good feelings last longer and more intensely.
- Emotional eating is triggered by thoughts (like *This stinks*), emotions (stress, anxiety, boredom) or habit (food is just there).
- Emotional eating happens we are trying to escape, avoid, elevate, or prolong positive and negative feelings. Basically, we either want to hold on to the feeling or make it go away!
- Emotional eating is not about lack of willpower. Don't get so hard on yourself!
- The good news is that you CAN change emotional eating habits.
- Emotional eating is about self-soothing. It's not about food. In other words, it is a way of coping with feelings. This is different than simply overeating.
- The goal is not to turn off feelings or to become joyful; instead it is to tone down feelings, like a dimmer switch, so you can think through your alternatives and choose something healthy.
- You can rewire your brain to enjoy other healthy alternatives besides food, with practice.

## Emotional Eating Checklist

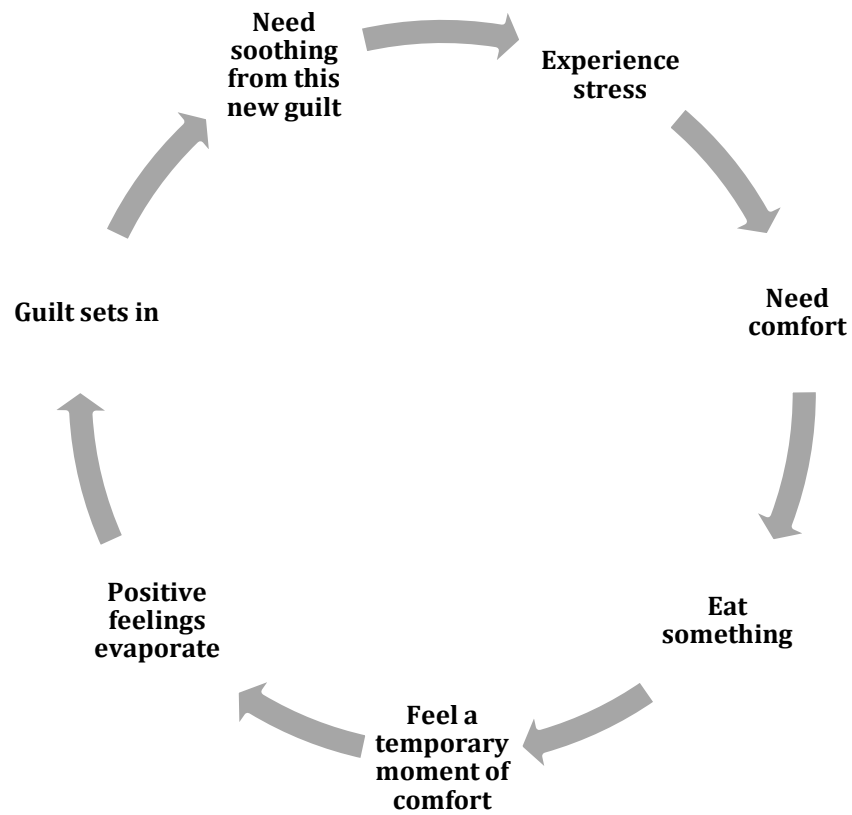
Check all the statements below that feel true to you:

- Do you eat when you are not physically hungry or right after you just ate?
- Do you reach for food before you even realize it?
- Do you find it difficult to find something satisfying to eat?
- Do you sometimes not feel full or satiated even after you have eaten?
- Do you feel a sense of temporary emotional relief after eating?
- Do you tell yourself that you “need” a treat to take the edge off your nerves?
- Do you often experience regret after eating something?
- Do you get something to eat when you are bored or to entertain yourself?
- Do you get a snack in order to put off or delay something you don’t want to do?
- Do you often feel stuffed or overly full?
- Do you crave comfort foods when stressed?
- Do you tell yourself that you deserve a treat or use food to celebrate?
- Do you turn to food for energy when you are tired or fatigued?
- Do you feel comforted or calmed when you eat?

If you answered ‘yes’ to any or most of the above questions, you may be an emotional eater.

All of us emotionally eat to some extent, so it’s likely that everyone would check two or three boxes. That’s quite normal! Food has an emotional component to it. With that said, if you answered yes to at least half of questions, it’s likely that emotional eating has evolved into a bigger issue in your life.

## Emotional Eating Cycle



Right now I am feeling (use at least three words to describe how you are feeling):

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At what point am I in this cycle?:

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At what step could I intervene most effectively in this cycle?:

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## Emotional vs. Physical Hunger



<b>Physical Hunger</b>	<b>Emotional Hunger</b>
Stomach growling	No physical cues (stomach is quiet)
Thinking about food, considering options	Experiencing specific cravings
Low energy, hunger grows slowly	Eating feels like the best—or only—option
Time has passed since your last meal	Little time has passed since the last bite
Food is satisfying	Food doesn't feel completely satisfying



## Emotional vs. Physical Hunger

### Four Ways to Tell the Difference

It's not easy to know the difference between physical and emotional hunger. Here are four questions to ask yourself when you need to spot the difference between an *emotional tug* for comfort and a genuine *need for nourishment*. The good news is that with some practice, you can become an expert at decoding the meaning behind your cravings.

#### 1. Satisfaction vs. Relief

Do I want to eat for energy to fuel my body to make it through the day, or am I looking for relief or a sense of safety and security?

**Test:** Place your hand on the part of your body that needs attention. Does it go to your stomach because it is rumbling? Or does it go to your head, because your brain feels dull and bored?

**Fix:** Aim to satisfy the part of the body that your hand rests on. If your brain is bored, give it some mentally stimulating material. If your hand traveled to your shoulders, lift and release your shoulders five times to relax your muscles. If it lands on your stomach, mindfully choose a nourishing food.

#### 2. Emotional vs. Physical Hunger

Am I eating in response to physical hunger (a rumbling stomach, low energy, and so on), or because I'm feeling scared, frustrated, overwhelmed or happy?

**Test:** Ask yourself, "How physically hungry am I, on a scale of 1 to 10?"—1 being starving, 5 being satiated, and 10 being stuffed. If you are at 1–5, it's likely that you do need something to eat. If so, that is okay. If you answer 6–10, it's likely that food isn't going to help a bit.

**Fix:** Try eating a Mandarin orange. It's a great food to help curb emotional eating and to de-stress. It's easy to peel and the segments are perfectly portioned to mindfully eat one at a time. The sweet flavor is satisfying and citrus aromas have been shown to be calming, according to research. Also, a Mandarin orange gives a little boost of vitamin C—just what you need when stressed or emotional.

### 3. Nutritious vs. Palatable

Am I choosing nutritious rich foods or sugary, fatty, salty ones?

**Test:** A truly hungry person will eat a large range of foods that will quickly quiet a rumbling stomach. Someone with an emotionally driven craving often only craves a specific type of food or taste—not just chocolate, but chocolate with caramel, for example. Or, if only a salty snack will do, it's likely that this is an urge for comfort.

**Fix:** It's important to keep on hand healthy snacks that do taste good to you. Often, people keep diet foods around that are bland and don't taste good. Kick up the taste of vegetables with hummus, sprinkle yogurt with some nuts, drizzle of chocolate on berries, dash spices in vegetable soup, and so on.

### 4. Lifelong vs. Transient

Am I building a healthy relationship with food, or one of anxiety, guilt, or fear?

**Test:** Before you eat, ask yourself how you will likely feel a minute after you finish this bite. If a negative emotion springs to mind, take a pause. Too often we wait until after we eat to check in with the emotional impact of what we consume.

**Fix:** Mindful eating can help you build a healthy and balanced relationship with food. Use the five S's of Mindful Eating no matter what you are eating:

1. Sit down.
2. Slowly chew.
3. Sense—taste the food, smell it, even listen to it.
4. Savor—enjoy the food.
5. Smile—pause before taking another bite.

Remember, it's okay to eat the foods you love, as long as you do it mindfully!

## Emotional Eating Triggers Tracker

Track the situations and feelings that lead to emotional eating with the chart that follows. Below are some examples for each category of trigger you'll be tracking.

**Thoughts:** Ex., *This stinks, I can't stand this, I need chocolate, I deserve a treat*

**Habits:** Ex., eating at the same time each day or during the same TV show each night

**Emotions:** Ex., bored, stressed, angry, sad, happy, anxious

**Relationship Stressors:** Ex., conflict, loneliness, arguments, lack of communication

**Situations:** Ex., eating alone, eating with food pushers

**Physiological Triggers:** Ex., feeling overly full

# Soothe Yourself Without Food: Helping Clients End Emotional Eating In 3 Easy Steps

Triggers	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
Thoughts							
Habits							
Emotions							
Relationship Stressors							
Situations							
Physiological Triggers							
Other:							

## Calm and Soothe Bingo

Feeling	Activity			
Anxious	Grounding Techniques (Tip #9)	Rituals (Tip #23)	Abdominal Breathing (Tip #15)	Mindful Squeegee Breath (Tip #1)
Frustrated	Soothing Sensations (Tip #42)	5-5-5-5-5 Exercise (Tip #8)	Compassion Meditation (Tip #14)	Mantras (Tip #13)
Bored	Energizing Stretches (Tip #33)	Creative Visualization: (Tip #41)	Mala Meditation (Tip #12)	Mindful Yoga (Tip #30)
Angry	Yoga for Anger (Tip #32)	Mona Lisa Smiling (Tip #27)	Critical to Curious (Tip #3)	Power Posing (Tip #28)
Stressed	Creative Journaling (Tip #34)	Zentangle (Tip #37)	Mindful Eating (Tip #6)	Mindful Movement (Tip #2)

When you feel the urge to emotionally eat, first identify what you are feeling and try using one of the tips above for five minutes. Circle the activities that work for you.

For more information on these activities, see the books *50 Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food* and *50 More Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*.

## Calm and Soothe Bingo

Feeling	Activity			

## Soothe Yourself Without Food: Helping Clients End Emotional Eating In 3 Easy Steps

Thank you for taking the time to read this handout series. I hope it was helpful to you! If you are seeking other resources on mindful eating, please see my website, <http://www.eatingmindfully.com>, for more free downloads and educational tools.

Mindfully yours,  
Susan Albers, PsyD

For a FREE download of motivational quotes for mindful eaters:  
<http://www.eatingmindfully.com/motivation>.

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## Dr. Albers's Books

*Eating Mindfully*

*50 Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*

*50 More Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food*

*EatQ*

*But I Deserve This Chocolate*

*Eat, Drink & Be Mindful*

*Mindful Eating 101*

*Diet and Motivation Secrets You Wish You Knew*