

Balance365 Episode 136 Transcript

ANNIE

Hello friends, welcome back to another episode of Balance365 Life Radio. We are back today talking about stress eating and I know if you have been around a while you might be thinking again, haven't they talked about that before? And yes, we have but we are back today with a slightly different twist on stress eating Jen and I are covering three skills for managing stress eating urges that we have not shared on the podcast before. And we're back talking about it because quite honestly, so many of you have said that you are struggling with stress eating, and we get it. Jen and I have both experienced stress eating, and we have learned some techniques to help us manage. If you struggle with stress eating urges, you gotta listen. I think you're really gonna enjoy it.

ANNIE

Hello, Jen, welcome back to another podcast episode. How are you?

JEN CAMPBELL

Good. How are you?

ANNIE

I'm great. I'm feeling a little bit more caffeinated.

JEN

Awesome.

ANNIE

With some coffee under the belt.

JEN

Right on.

ANNIE

And we are kicking off today's episode talking about a super popular topic. I feel like I say that every episode. There's so many super popular topics. But it's stress eating.

JEN

Yeah.

ANNIE

Have you ever stress ate?

JEN

Of course, have you?

BOTH

[Laugh]

ANNIE

Yes, Tuesday, actually, we had a, we had a stressful birthday party here and I found myself diving into the pizza and I was full on like, "This is the thing I'm doing. And I know it's because I'm stressed and I'm just, I'm doing it anyways."

JEN

On that note, I will say that chaotic experiences with children seem to be a big trigger for stress eating with women in our audience. So that's great that you brought that up.

ANNIE

Which, we're going to talk about triggers, aren't we?

JEN

Yeah, we are.

ANNIE

Yeah. So, what is stress eating and how does it develop?

JEN

So stress eating is essentially emotional eating. It's under that umbrella. Although emotional eating could be other situations too, but it's under that umbrella. And it develops like any other habit, right? So first of all to note, we have a podcast on this, food is comforting, so it does provide us with comfort when we eat. And at some point, you used food to counteract stress. And it worked, or it provided you with a reward, which may have been temporary, but it provided you with the reward. And your brain lays down a habit loop, right?

ANNIE

Yep.

JEN

So, a habit loop is basically, all habits are part of a habit loop. It starts with a trigger, or a reminder. That's followed by a routine. And then you get a reward. And after you've done that a couple times your brain is like, "Hey, we like this. We're going to start creating a habit loop." Neural pathway is created. You'll keep doing it. So an example that's non food is coming up to a stoplight. So the very first time you were driving and you were learning all the road rules, when you started coming up to a stoplight, you would have had to consciously go, "Okay, now we brake," and you had to brake at a certain rate, you wouldn't just slam on your brakes, you would come to a stop. And your reward would be you didn't get T-boned by flying through the intersection. So you do that a couple times. And then you're unconsciously doing it because it becomes a habit and pretty soon you're moving through traffic and when you try to recall moving through traffic later on, you can't even really recall it, because all of those things are happening unconsciously. You see a stoplight. Your foot starts pushing down on the brake. You stop in front of the light and there's a reward.

ANNIE

And the sneaky thing, the good and the bad thing is, habits are so automatic. You might even have trouble identifying your habits because they are so automatic, right? Like you don't even recognize. They're not requiring a lot of mental and physical energy because they're just, you just go, you just do.

JEN

Right, and when you really start thinking about it, you are working through habits all day long, right? I get up in the morning, I go to the kitchen, I get my coffee out, I make my coffee, like, all of these routines that I have, there's a trigger. Then I have the routine and then I have the reward. And you find out how deeply ingrained habits can become when your environment changes. So imagine if somebody moves the cutlery from your cutlery drawer that you have reached for for eight years. You make coffee, you start making your coffee and you reach for a spoon. That's what you do. The reward is you find the spoon. Somebody has moved the cutlery, or maybe you move the cutlery yourself in a kitchen revamp, you're still, you'll keep going to that drawer, you know, for how long over and over and over until you learn a new habit, right?

ANNIE

I got my hair colored over the weekend, and my hair colorist had moved to locations. And I knew that. I got into the car and just was like, "Okay, I'm going to go see TJ." Showed up at the wrong location. [Laughs]

JEN

Right. [Laughs]

ANNIE

Then it's like, "Wait, how did I get here?"

JEN

Yes, so these are habits and what's interesting is we talked about this and you and I, we talked about it, we have no shame around these habits. But when it comes to food, a lot of people bring shame into the equation. And they have that whole diet culture mentality of, "Oh, I screwed up." But actually, it's just a habit, and when you revert back to old eating habits, your brain's just taking you back to that old habit. And so when it comes to stress eating, at some point there was a trigger which a trigger can be a feeling. You experienced stress, you ate and got a reward from that. And you did it again the next day and the next day and and pretty soon it's just a habit and so unconsciously, now it's going on, you feel stress and your brain goes to food. Like it's as natural as you reaching for a spoon after you start brewing your coffee. It's just a thought. Maybe your mouth starts watering even. And maybe you're like, "I need ketchup chips stat."

[Laughs]

ANNIE

Are we talking about you, Jen? [Laughs] It must be you because we don't have ketchup chips in the States.

JEN

Oh, okay, maybe it's...Maybe it's me just a little bit.

ANNIE

Yeah. Okay. So what do we do with that, Jen? Like, okay, so if you're listening to this podcast, chances are you've probably identified that, "Okay, yeah, I do do this. This is when I do this." You know, now what?

JEN

Yeah, so before we start, I want to bring something else up. Just a little little note is for our hardcore dieters out there, or anyone who's listening who is on a very restrictive diet, I used to be that person as well. And when you are that person, you're always looking for reasons to figure out why you're eating. And I remember latching on to this idea that I emotionally eat. And in hindsight, I was just really hungry. And so there's no amount of emotional eating work that we can do with you, if you are physiologically starving, your body is going into like, this is like a survival mechanism you have, so none of these techniques will work if what you actually need to do is eat. So I was

definitely hangry a lot all the time. And that felt very emotional for me. But emotional eating was not the solution. It was just to eat.

ANNIE

Spoiler alert, dieters are often hangry. [Laughs]

JEN

Absolutely, yes.

ANNIE

Jen is not special that is, like, a symptom of a dieter.

JEN

Yeah. So we're gonna take you through how we coach. And there are three ways that we recommend dealing with stress eating experiences. And first we want you to understand human behavior. And we explain that with the CBT method, which is the cognitive behavioral therapy method. It's super common. I love the way Brooke Castillo talks about it. She's a life coach, but I mean, therapists, this is old as time, just kidding. It's not as old as time, but it's decades old. And that is, we have a circumstance, so your circumstance might be you are coming home from work and your kids start fighting right when you walk in the door. You have a thought about that circumstance, that thought drives a feeling. The feeling drives an action, and those actions are getting your results. So we all go through this cycle, right? And we're often not aware of it. So what what we see a lot is when people come into coaching before they start understanding the cycle, they're getting a result in their life that they are unhappy with. So somebody might, the result for some women we work with might be that they are overweight, and they have feelings about that. And they might even know some of the actions they take in order to create that result. But they haven't dug back into why do they keep taking those actions, right? It's because in different circumstances, they have thoughts, those thoughts drive feelings, those feelings drive actions, and then they're getting a result. So the first way you can deal with stress eating is to identify your triggers. And this is often the circumstance you're in that ends up driving that behavioral cycle that ultimately ends in stress eating. And you can try and eliminate that trigger, which really comes down to changing your circumstance.

ANNIE

And this could be a time of day, it could be a place, it could be maybe conversations with certain people or an experience at work or like, just your environment might feel stressful. Like it could be a variety of of triggers.

JEN

Right, but what I want to note here is out of the three ways we're going to talk about today, this one can be the most difficult to change because often we can't control our circumstances. And often it's not a quick fix, right? So one reason somebody might be really stressed out is because they're over committed to their community, whether they have parent volunteer nights here, running to soccer there. And yeah, you need to cut back on those things. So identifying that, like, I really need to cut back, I'm way overextended. You just can't, you can't do that overnight. But I want to talk about it because I do think a lot of people stretch themselves way too thin. And then they on the other end of it, they have insane expectations of themselves to not need coping mechanisms, when actually any human being in that circumstance would need to develop coping mechanisms to handle it, and we live in yes, very busy, highly productive world. So yeah, we definitely need to be less committed in today's world, but also what we hear a lot from our clients is it's how they're treated by different friends or family or, you know, for example, something their mom might say to them at Christmas dinner or etc. And that starts driving this behavioral cycle. And so the solution there might be, you need better boundaries with your friends and family. But that's not a quick fix either. So, but I'd love for everybody listening to reflect on that, identify their triggers for stress eating and think about how they can either eliminate or just, or just change that circumstance so it's less stressful.

ANNIE

And it could just be as simple as asking yourself like, "What is stressing me out? Why am I stressed out? Do I have control over any of this?" And, you know, who knows? That's going to be really person specific. But if you do have control, maybe you do have an opportunity to change the circumstance. It very well might be out of your control, as Jen said.

JEN

Yeah. And so for me like my kids coming home from school, and all the kids coming in the door at once. That has been a big stress trigger for me in the past when my kids start fighting. Actually, my kids fighting period is a big stress trigger for me. And I remember thinking one day, "Okay, you can't control this circumstance, but you can influence it." So when we are on our way home, I will lay out my exact expectations for when we walk in the door. "Please do not fight. Put your shoes away, hang your backpacks up." And so I'm just sort of improving. I'm not taking the stress out of coming in the door with all my kids, but I'm just kind of making some improvements to it. Yeah. The second way you can deal with stress is to examine your thoughts about the circumstance. And this is probably the most powerful way of being able to manage emotions period, but particularly your stress level. And so, a lot of this happens

unconsciously, what thoughts are you having about the circumstance you're in, remembering that it's your thoughts about circumstance that create feelings, right? The circumstances don't create your feelings. It's your thoughts about the circumstance creating the feelings. So, you walk in the door with your kids, they start fighting. You blow up, your stress, whatever it is, there are thoughts that come between those. And it could often be you know, like, not this again, this is the worst in the world. I can't handle this, you know, how dare, they they're not supposed to do this often. I think those thoughts are right before we start feeling very stressed. I think often those thoughts are somewhere around "It's not supposed to be this way." And that just drives a lot of frustration. Right?

ANNIE

You know what came to mind actually Jen is something we were talking about this morning, we were talking about my workout routine. And I think a perfect way to highlight how thoughts affect your feelings or circumstance can be just neutral. It is what it is. And the thoughts are really powerful, is that if I looked at my workout routine, I would look at it and I'd be super jazzed, I'd like, "This is gonna be great. We're gonna feel so good afterwards. I'm looking forward to this. I'm super excited." Jen would look at that same workout and think, "No, I don't want to do this."

BOTH

[Laugh]

ANNIE

This is -

JEN

You told me this. [Laughs]

ANNIE

"This is horrible. I don't ever want to do this." [Laughs]

JEN

Yeah, so this morning Annie told me that she's doing this workout program and two days a week she has to lift for 90 minutes and so Annie's like, "So awesome." And my thought is "No way." So like, I never want to workout for 90 minutes straight. [Laughs]

ANNIE

Same circumstance, different thoughts, which lead to different feelings.

JEN

Create different feelings, different actions. different results. I clearly don't have your strength, which is totally fine. [Laughs]

ANNIE

Yes.

JEN

Or your big biceps. So, anyways, so yeah, and that's a really good way to put it, that the circumstance is neutral, right? So you're walking in the door with your kids and they start fighting, you explode. Another person doesn't. Another person tolerates it. I learned this from my father in law who is a pediatric dentist. And I remember when the kids were younger and we just had a, you know, they were staying with us, hellish evening getting the kids to bed, I come back out and I apologized to him for all the noise, like I was just like, "Sorry, that was really chaotic. The kids really lost it." And he goes, "I didn't even didn't even hear it, doesn't bother me at all. I deal with this all day long." Because he is a pediatric dentist, he listens to upset kids all day long. So his thoughts are actually pretty neutral about upset kids. He can handle it. He has a very high tolerance for upset children. And so that's another circumstance. That's another way of going, "Oh, like some people don't react the same way I do, because they have different thoughts. So how could I change my thoughts about the circumstance in order to not have a super high stress level?"

ANNIE

Or if you flip it, someone like Jen's father in law, who feels very calm and unaffected, and you know, unbothered by loud kids at bedtime. What does he think about loud kids at bedtime? He probably thinks like, "Yes, how it's supposed to be. They're kids." This is what -

JEN

- Yes.

ANNIE

- this is what they do. And Jen over here is thinking like, They're not supposed to be like this." [Laughs]

JEN

"They're not supposed to be acting this way."

ANNIE

Yeah.

JEN

And that leads to feelings of frustration, and I'm very stressed. So, and that's another thing to talk about here. So I'm glad you brought that up, is acceptance can be such a fantastic tool to lower your stress levels. You know, like a thought you could have is, "This is the way things are supposed to be. This is how children are supposed to act." And like we need to go back to the circumstance thing here. I'm not talking about devastating circumstances, right? Like, you can't think your way out of a devastating circumstance. Like if you lost somebody close to you or somebody close to you was in a horrible accident. You can't think your way out of feeling stressed in that. We're talking, I'm talking about, like normal everyday occurrences that cause a lot of stress for us.

ANNIE

Yeah, and this isn't also a tool to justify harmful or hurtful behavior from others.

JEN

Right.

ANNIE

Yeah, this is really just about your relationship with yourself and your own thoughts and in situations that, you know, are relatively normal everyday occurrences.

JEN

Right, yeah, or the circumstance could be the end of the day, your boss called you in and talked to you about your performance. And after work, you're stress eating and so, it could be, you know, you could change your thoughts there about, your thoughts could be, "Whoever promised you a stress free job?" Right? Like, this is part of having a job at this company. I am responsible for certain results. I did not get the results, right? And just accepting that and being okay with like, your feelings around that right?

ANNIE

Yes.

JEN

Yeah. Yes. So examine your thoughts is the second way, which we're also saying, and explore if you can change them. What other thoughts can you have that lead to the feelings that you want to have? Right? So like, I don't want to feel stress, here is the way I want to feel. I either want to feel less stressed or here's a different feeling that I want to have. So what thoughts would I need to have in this situation? And I guess for

me, so, two common stressors, I think children are a big stress trigger. But stress eating often is happening I find mid afternoon, after work situation. This is what we're hearing from our clients. And it's happening at night. And so a thought that I often come back to is challenging myself on "Why aren't things not supposed to be this way?" Like, you know, knowing that often my source of frustration is going, "Things aren't supposed to be this way." Well, why not? Like, who said that? Right? Like, whoever told me having kids would be stress free? This is how it's supposed to be. That's another good thought. Yeah, this is how it's supposed to be. The third way that you can manage stress eating is to change the action you take. So this is breaking the link. So when you think back to the habit cycle of trigger: routine, which is your habit, which is to stress eat; reward, change the routine, and this is habit building 101, it is replacing your habit you currently have with a new one. So back to the cutlery in the drawer thing. You reach for that old drawer so many times in a row before you your brain starts laying down a new neural pathway to reach for the new drawer, then you have a new habit. So creating a new habit.

ANNIE

And here's the kicker, whatever new habit you replace that with, it needs to elicit a similar reward. Right? So if you are eating as a means to reduce stress and you take out the eating, you need to, ideally you would replace the eating with something that reduces your stress, that gives you the same, like, "Okay, there we go." And that could be a walk, a shower, a fizzy water, calling a friend, reading a book, a bubble bath, you know, whatever. But the reward, keeping that reward is really important.

JEN

Yeah, and so we all deserve stress reducing activities, right? So you deserve to find a way to soothe yourself when you're in a very stressful situation. What I find with eating is it's an immediate reward, right? Like it's like, food in my mouth now. But most people don't feel awesome when that's over. And in most situations, the stress is actually still there. You've just temporarily avoided it, you've temporarily got yourself out of pain.

ANNIE

And not only temporarily but you've likely moved that pain or discomfort or stress further down the road. You prolonged it somewhere else. So instead of feeling it in the moment you're, you know, a month down the road feeling with discomfort of additional stress, plus maybe weight gain, plus poor eating habits.

JEN

For some people, even feel more stressed after right? Because they might, maybe they are working towards a weight loss goal or better nutrition habits. And now they've made

that commitment to themselves, now they're stress eating and after it's over, they just feel guilty, like I wish I wouldn't have done that, that wasn't part of my plan. So start thinking of alternative activities that can help you reduce your stress. And this is going to be very individual right? Because like I can't come home from work with my kids or after school and then just go jump in the shower. [Laughs] "Just one second, you guys, I'm going to grab a shower." But what can work, right? Like what works for you, Annie?

ANNIE

For stress reduction?

JEN

Yeah, and also I want to add I've coached a lot of women about alcohol on this, that it's, they're not using food, they're using like a glass of wine.

ANNIE

It's me, you're talking...The women.

BOTH

[Laugh]

ANNIE

And this is hard because I do think, like Jen said, a lot of the activities that I typically use to reduce my stress, I cannot do in the presence of kids. It would be, you know, like solo time, or meditation or whatever. So when I'm with my kids in particular, it's honestly just communicating to them, pending your kids age, "I need a minute."

JEN

Oh, God, I've heard you say that to your kids so many times, like when we're on a meeting, "I need a minute."

ANNIE

Yes. [Laughs]

JEN

[Laughs] That's exactly how you sound.

ANNIE

You need to get out of here for a minute. And the look on their faces like, "Oh, mom's not messing around." But honestly, it literally could look like going to the bathroom and

taking 10 deep breaths. It could be turning on a podcast. Turning on some music, something to kind of distract myself from the stress almost, you know?

JEN

Yeah, even with the 10 deep breaths, that could come with thoughts, right? Like, "This is going to pass," like, understanding this is going to pass and just talking to yourself. So some people will call a friend. Right? But if that's not available to you, you can be that friend, just talk yourself down. Right?

ANNIE

Yeah.

JEN

This is going to pass. This is all okay.

ANNIE

I do that often. [Laughs]

JEN

Yeah.

ANNIE

This is fine. It's fine. We're fine. We're fine.

JEN

So come up with the alternatives for soothing that work for you. And then create that new habit knowing that like with the spoons, and the cutlery drawer, you'll probably still choose to eat many times habitually before you start choosing the new behavior. So it is uncomfortable, right? When we choose a new habit, our brains really want us to go do that old habit. It's really, they're really pulling us into that old habit all the time. And this is nothing anyone needs to be ashamed about. This is just total human basic biology and it's how our brains work. Our brain's whole job is to conserve energy for us. That's not their whole job. But that's a job that they're doing for us. And so, even thinking, and new habits require energy. So your brain is like, "No, let's do this whole thing." So you're going to have to understand your brain in that way. And you're going to have to kind of zoom out and go, not shame yourself, because when we shame ourselves, we just, that leads us to despair, usually, and just falling back into the old habit anyways. "This is just a habit, my brain's trying to get me to eat. I am choosing a new path. I'm creating a new habit and a new neural pathway in my brain. I'm going to do this new thing."

ANNIE

Yeah. And I want to say that it might be very easy to identify these stress eating behaviors when you're not stressed. Like, when you have some distance between you and the situation, you could be like, "Oh, yeah," like me on Tuesday night, you know, like, clearly I am like, that was an example of stress eating in my life. But when you find yourself in it the next time, Jen, you and I were talking about this, you shared this, that awareness isn't like, "Oh, I'm doing the thing." It might be like, "I did the thing, and I'm aware of it after."

JEN

Yeah, and it's a journey. So when you're going to change a habit, you will, step one will be awareness. And you will be aware of that after you do it. And then you might, that it might happen a few times, and then the next time you might catch yourself halfway through. So you could be halfway through a bag of chips and you're like, "I'm doing it. I'm doing thing again." And then that could happen a few times. And then it might be, you catch yourself right before you're about to do it, and you redirect, or not, depending on what choice you make. And then the next time it might be you're ready, right?

ANNIE

Yeah. So phase four, I think what trips people up is they think, "I've identified times of my day, times of my week, circumstances in my life that trigger stress eating, and now that I'm aware of it, I just won't do it anymore." And that's like, that's not usually how it works. Right? It's like, you gotta like stumble through it a little bit before you stop it, before it even starts.

JEN

Yeah, and another, just a note on sitting with uncomfortable feelings. Like we've talked about this in previous podcasts. But one of the biggest barriers we see to people being able to change or to lose weight and keep it off is they are discomfort avoidant. It can be very helpful to identify situations where you are using food as a way to avoid uncomfortable feelings. And that we can again, as we discussed, you can always just think your way out of discomfort. Like it's just, it's just a reality that discomfort is a part of life. And there's a lot of things we're going to feel in life, including painful things, right? And that just is, it's a part of the human existence.

ANNIE

You don't get to avoid that. [Laughs]

JEN

You don't get to avoid that. And human beings actually cause themselves a lot of suffering with the actions they take to get out of pain. As human beings, present day human beings, we could really uplevel our lives by learning to increase our threshold for sitting with discomfort, right? But you know, when you're like, lonely, but I mean, this topic of this podcast is stressed. You're like, "I gotta get rid of this. I can't handle this." And sometimes the answer is just to go identify the feeling. "Wow, I am very stressed right now due to frustration, overwhelm all of those things." Deep breath. "Those are valid, legitimate feelings, and that is just the way I'm feeling right now and that's okay."

ANNIE

And that's okay.

JEN

And that's okay.

ANNIE

It's all part of the experience.

JEN

Yes. So, to summarize, we have three ways to deal with stress eating. Number one, identify your triggers and either reduce - which is your the circumstance. So either reduce or eliminate that circumstance altogether, or reduce the load of that circumstance. Number two is to identify your thoughts about your circumstance and change your thoughts. Think about what your ideal outcome would be, what feelings do you want to feel? So what thoughts do you want to have in that situation? And number three is to change the action you take, which is to change your behavior. So find an alternative stress reducing behavior instead of eating.

ANNIE

And remember that, try as you might, none of that is going to work if you're just hungry. Right? If you, if girlfriend, if you need to eat, you need to eat.

JEN

You need to eat. And then the final note I wanted to say is that we do a lot of sort of self reflection and identity work in Balance365 coaching and to think about, how does stress eating...Is that part of who you are, right? A lot of times when change really starts to stick for people, is when they realize that old behavior, it's just not who they are anymore. Or they're considering a new behavior. And they're like, "Yeah, that's the woman that I'm becoming." So is stress eating part of who you are? Or who do you want to become? Does that woman stress eat, and then start reverse engineering?

What that woman needs to think about in stressful situations in order to drop the urge altogether.

ANNIE

Yeah. And I love that we use kind of our best self as the goal, as the vision not, you know, some celebrity, not some public figure that's like got their stuff together, and a support team like, no, this is you your best self, your vision for your wellness and your health. What does she think and feel? How does she behave?

JEN

Yeah.

ANNIE

Yeah. Awesome. Good chat.

JEN

Yeah.

ANNIE

All right. Thank you, Jen.

JEN

Thanks, Annie.

ANNIE

Bye.

JEN

Bye.

ANNIE BREES (OUTRO)

Hey, everyone, if your mind has been blown while listening to this podcast, just wait until you work with us. Let us help you level up your health and wellness habits and your life inside Balance365 coaching. Head over to balance365.co to enroll in next month's coaching round. See you on the inside.