

Balance365 Episode 41 Transcript

Annie: The comfort food season is upon us with fall and winter come a bevy of stereotypical comfort foods, warm soups, casseroles and fresh baked goodies are gracing menus everywhere. But is there truth behind comfort foods? Do they in fact provide comfort, soothe us or lift our spirits when we're down or is this simply a justification to eat the foods that we have declared as indulgent or bad.

On today's episode of Balance365Life Radio, Lauren, Jen and I explore the science behind comfort foods, scratch the surface on emotional eating and offer strategies to help you dive deeper into exploring alternatives to frequent emotional overeating. Enjoy! Lauren and Jen, we're back with another juicy topic or should I say, soothing topic.

Lauren: Comforting topic, maybe?

Annie: Comforting topic. Yeah, we're talking about comfort foods today. First of all, Jen, how are you?

Jen: Good. How are you?

Annie: I'm great. It's kind of warm here. It's unseasonably warm here so it's nice.

Jen: Us too. My kids are still wearing shorts which is crazy for Canada.

Annie: Yeah, Lauren, how about you?

Lauren: Well, no, it's not warm here, it's like 50.

Annie: Oh. Well that's not terrible.

Lauren: It's not terrible.

Annie: The sun looks like it's shining.

Lauren: Yes, the sun is shining today, which is nice.

Annie: Not that we would know.

Jen: I love fall. I love warm falls. I love, like, this is my favorite season ever to be outside, just like crisp and fresh and you don't get all sweaty.

Annie: Except the wind. The wind and lip gloss just don't mix.

Lauren: You gotta wear the matte.

Annie: No. Too dry.

Lauren: Matte color.

Annie: Too dry.

Jen: We haven't had any, we haven't had any wind, really. We've had such a good fall.

Annie: Oh, nice. So I'll just move to Canada.

Lauren: Yeah.

Annie: Is what we're saying. OK. So we are talking about, speaking of fall, about comfort foods because comfort foods, it's like the season of comfort foods, right? We've got warm soups for fall and like more hearty meals, especially around Thanksgiving and holiday a lot of the foods that we are enjoying can feel like a comfort foods and what qualifies as a comfort food is really relative from person to person. And what we want to talk about today: is there science behind comfort foods or is it just an excuse to justify indulging in favorite foods? But first I want to know, Lauren, do you have what you would say a comfort food is?

Lauren: I don't have a specific food, I'd say more like sweets.

Annie: Oh really?

Lauren: Sweet, carby chocolatey foods. Yeah. That's what I go to when I need to feel better.

Annie: Got it. OK, Jen what about you?

Jen: I think more savory, like I think of, like, a hot bowl of soup with some crackers and cheese and yeah, something that like, I would get fed as a child when I was sick, maybe.

Lauren: I guess I'll add mac and cheese would also be a comfort food.

Annie: You cannot change your answer.

Lauren: I have many, many comfort foods.

Jen: I think we all do, right?

Annie: Yeah. Yeah and I would agree. I like warm, warm and savory would be my go to, like soups, chili with Fritos which we discussed on the Halloween podcast. So OK. So is there a truth behind comfort foods and actually there's research to support both that it is fact and it is also fiction and it kinda depends on what study you're looking at and who they're testing and what the habits of those test members are saying. So what we want to do today is just to examine some of the elements that might affect comfort foods and then talk about how to disengage in regularly eating comfort foods if that is something you're interested in, right?

Jen: Right. Because a lot of our Balance365ers struggle with living high stress lives and reaching for food as their comfort, which ultimately for these women, what they are telling us is that it's kind of a big rock in their lives as far as meeting their health and wellness goals.

Annie: Yeah and oftentimes this essentially boils down to emotional eating or it can boil down to emotional eating. We just call it comfort foods and again, what's comforting to Jen and Lauren and me might look slightly different but so the first thing I do want to offer is that comfort foods or foods in general that are high in fat or high in sugar can activate the reward center of the brain which, Lauren, I know you've talked about on previous podcasts, correct?

Lauren: Correct. Doesn't mean they're addictive.

Annie: Right but they can give us, like, a little reward so to speak.

Lauren: Yeah.

Annie: Like a reward reaction and the first study that I looked at was, like, thank you to whoever the participants were in the study and I know the Jen's study that she's going to share might feel the same way but they were first asked to rate their mood and hunger level and how full they felt and then they've viewed sad images while listening to sad music and I'm like, "Gosh, that's just terrible." And

they were given a saturated fat solution or a saline solution through a feeding tube so these people were like all in, they were committed. They didn't even get to taste it.

Jen: What did the saline solution have to do with anything?

Annie: It was a placebo.

Jen: Oh, OK, I was like.

Annie: I know.

Jen: Random.

Annie: It is. The result were that none of the participants knew which infusion they were receiving, so they didn't know if they were getting the fat solution or the saline solution and then they were given an M.R.I. brain scan and were asked again the same questions about their mood, their hunger level and how full they were and the findings showed that the participants who got the fatty acid reported they felt about half as sad as those who received the saline in solution and the areas of the brain that were affected by emotion or mood were shown to be activated in the M.R.I. brain scan. So this study in particular would concluded that the stomach somehow communicates with the brain telling it how happy it should be or how sad it is but Jen, on the contrary, you found something a little bit different, right?

Jen: Yeah, well this work is from Traci Mann, Dr. Traci Mann who we talk about a lot on this podcast because I really love her work and she has a book called *Secrets From The Eating Lab* which I would recommend anyone interested to buy and she runs this eating lab in Minnesota and she does all kinds of food psychology testing and she has a really great study on comfort foods and in her study she took 100 participants and she did something similar where she, you know, looked at their mood before the study, showed them a whole bunch of sadness. and then she rated their mood-

Annie: Womp womp.

Jen: Womp womp. She had them rate their mood after seeing all this sadness and everybody was very, very sad. In fact, a couple of them had to be excused from the study because they were so sad and then they were all given, some of

them were given comfort foods, some of them were given foods that they had reported feeling neutral towards and some of them were given no food and in the results of this study. After the food consumption or the no consumption if just letting that time pass, everybody's moods were about the same. They had improved about the same amount whether they had had comfort foods or neutral food or no food and her conclusions to this study are that it doesn't, you don't need comfort food to feel more comfortable, like you don't need those things that you think are going to bring, that's just like a, basically, a self limiting belief, right. Like, I believe this will make me feel more comfort but actually in a scientific setting and it actually did not bring more comfort if that makes sense.

Annie: Yep.

Jen: So putting that into my own life, if I'm feeling down and I want to have a comfort meal, what this study is saying is that if I just wait and have no food or if I have something else to eat, if I wanted to choose to have a salad instead of some soup and grilled cheese, I would feel the exact same later on, whether I had made any of those choices.

Annie: So, in other words time can be a comfort.

Jen: Absolutely, just letting time pass can help you.

Annie: Yeah.

Jen: Which which makes sense to me as far as processing emotions, right but that just that brings into play the limitations of this study that Traci Mann did and now we don't know the background of the people, we don't know what their habits were before they came into the study and that comes back to probably something that Lauren wants to talk about is habits, when so I think what Lauren wants to talk about is when emotional eating is already a habit that might be where you have learned to get your comfort. If emotional eating is not a habit you have then perhaps that's why. Then, you know, comfort foods maybe don't-

Annie: It doesn't affect you.

Jen: - make or break your experience, right. So what Dr Traci Mann is saying, she's not food shaming at all, she's saying if you want ice cream, have ice cream, just don't use, you know, you don't need to use comfort foods foods as some kind of excuse to eat unhealthy, like just have the food you want to have and move on.

Annie. Right. You know it keeps coming to mind is whenever I have a little bit of upset stomach, I don't know if I learned this in pregnancy or maybe as a child but I always go back to like, maybe if I just eat something I'll feel better. It's like this-

Lauren: I do that sometimes too.

Annie: Yeah and it's like, I'm not necessarily hungry, I'm just feeling off and I'm like, maybe if, I put that, but I have to believe that's definitely a learned behavior because it doesn't always soothe whatever it is I'm trying to comfort.

Jen: Yeah, like maybe your parents when you were sick as a little girl, maybe they would be-

Annie: Yeah and I can hear myself doing it to my kids too, like, "Mom, my stomach hurts." I'm like, "Have you had some crackers?"

Lauren: Right.

Jen: The other thing though to remember is that food is comforting to us from a very young age, like those of us when we're babies whether we're nursed or bottle fed, you know, when we're crying, we'll get fed, right, so it's not like totally out there to offer people food, you know, we were offered food from from the time we're born to soothe, to soothe us.

Annie: Yep.

Lauren: This is goes into what Jen told everyone I wanted to talk about and then just said it.

Jen: Talked for you, that's what big sisters do, Lauren.

Lauren: Yes. Which is that, like, we have in Balance365 we have an emotional eating section and that's kind of where it all starts, right, is when we're younger, usually, children at some point, something happens, we get hurt, like, this goes into what Annie was saying too, like our stomachs hurt or we get hurt and someone offers us food and over time that happens over and over and over again and we get that neural pathway in our brain that says "OK, whatever the emotion is, hurt, sad, frustrated, whatever it is for you triggers that want for whatever that food is and then you get the response that, OK, you feel better"

and that can become just a learned habit over years and years and that's basically what emotional eating is, right.

Jen: So that could look like when a child falls and skins their knee and mom and dad are like, you know-

Lauren: Have a cookie.

Jen: Pick them up, get a Band-Aid and go grab some cookies right and then doing that over and over and over creates a neural pathway.

Lauren: Right, it's not like it happens one time and you're an emotional eater but it happens over years, over and over and over again and eventually-

Annie: Repetition.

Jen: Right and there's a big push right now to get treats out of public schools used as rewards in classrooms so it's like, you know, you've got, whether it's "You did well in this exam or this class, you guys are all being good and quiet so here's everyone gets a sucker at the end of the day," that kind of thing. So it's like, that's another pattern, like, you've been good here's some food.

Lauren: Right and I really enjoy too, we talk a lot in our Feeding Your Family part of Balance365 and in the podcast episodes that we've done, that Ellyn Satter recommends just to do like a treat a snack just because sometimes. Like, it's not for a reward, it's just, we eat this sometimes and that's fine and it kind of takes that morality out of it too.

Jen: Yeah, like you don't have to be, it doesn't have to be based on your behavior that you get great tasting food, it's just-

Lauren: Or your emotion.

Jen: Right. So yeah, so yeah, I think she suggests for kids that are grappling with this or any families grappling with this just offering up plate of cookies after school for snacks sometimes. Today we're just having cookies, you know, we don't have to balance this out with anything "healthy", we're just having cookies today.

Lauren: If you want to learn more about that, we do have a podcast on it but-

Jen: Yes.

Annie: Hi. Can I add something?

Jen: It's the Lauren and Jen show now.

Annie: I'm like opening my mouth and nope you too just were, which is great.

Lauren: It's the story of my life.

Annie: I do want to add, though, along those same lines that we can associate specifically with people we love and that's, for those reasons, because we make these connections and these associations with, like, cookies with mom taking care of us or mom being at home after school or she makes me chicken soup when I don't feel well and and it's not really necessarily about the soup, it's more about like Mom taking care of you when you don't feel well that we associate the soup or the food with-

Lauren: Or like a special recipe.

Jen: You want to be close to that memory.

Annie: Yeah and so when we feel lonely or we're sad, it's, like, not totally out of the realm of possibility that they're reaching for these foods to feel comfort and security and one study that, just in researching for this podcast, there was evidence that showed that people with positive family relationships were more likely than others to reach for comfort in foods on the days they felt lonely. So there are-

Jen: Awwwww.

Annie: I know, like that's just really, which I think is really sweet, you know, I'm thinking about Jen's, on the Halloween podcast couple weeks ago how she shared that she makes her chili and garlic bread before Halloween. Like, I don't-

Jen: Yeah, that's our tradition.

Annie: I don't-

Lauren: My mom makes chili and I wasn't on this podcast so I didn't hear this, but my mom makes chili and grilled ham and cheese sandwiches.

Jen: Oh neat.

Annie: I like garlic bread better.

Jen: Yeah, I also don't, if I was sick, if I was sick and staying at my grandma's for the day she always made the soup nobody knows and about nobody eats, it's like Campbell's, just like Campbell's brand, Campbell's Beans and Bacon Soup and it was like our thing. My grandma made Beans and Bacon Soup and so when I am sick now I just want a bowl of Beans and Bacon Soup and it has to do with feeling close to my grandma and feeling cared for while I'm sick.

Lauren: It's not about the food, it's about the memory.

Jen: Yeah, it's just a memory and the smell and all that it triggers for me, it triggers comfort, right.

Annie: Yeah, it's like you've read the outline, Jen. Because I was just going to say, that similarly smells and emotional memory are tied so closely together, they're so closely connected and an interesting fact, odor-evoked memories tend to be positive and smell has the power to improve our sense of love and connection. So like when you smell a smell and you have a memory associated with it, it's usually positive, which I, that's been my personal experience, too, like, you smell, even sometimes a perfume, you know, like, I'll smell someone's, like, "Oh, they smell like my mom or they smell, you know, that's mostly dad or that smells, that's my laundry detergent" or whatever it is, you know, even outside of food but that's, you know, that's why I mean-

Lauren: Dreft. Do you guys love the smell of Dreft?

Jen: What?

Annie: Oh, the baby-

Lauren: The baby laundry detergent.

Annie: Yeah, no, I feel that way about Pampers sensitive wipes, though because that's what they gave in the hospital.

Lauren: Yeah, we use those.

Annie: Yeah, but as it relates to food that could be why you go to the State Fair and you smell corn dogs and you're like flooded with all these memories. Or donuts or coffee, you know, the smell of coffee brewing in the morning or apple pies in the oven, which don't happen at my house but it sounds nice. And the other thing I want to add too is that another interesting, this was just one study but another interesting fact is that there might be a difference between males and females when it comes to comfort food and this was a 2005 study from Cornell, they surveyed 277 men and women and they found that females tend to seek comfort and sweetened sugary foods like ice cream, while males prefer savory comfort foods like steak and so forth. So apparently Jen and I have the manly-

Jen: The palate of a man.

Annie: But the study also found that men tend to use comfort food as a reward, while women often feel guilty after indulging, which is, huh, something we haven't heard before, huh.

Jen: Yeah.

Annie: Yeah, sounds like-

Jen: Diet culture right there.

Annie: Right, for sure but even if we're eating for comfort versus nourishment, that's not necessarily a bad thing, like the three of us have shared that we eat for comfort sometimes not because we're hungry, not because we need calories, not because we need protein or whatever, it's just because like food is good and we have good memories and connections and associations with it but there might be listeners that are listening who are finding themselves eating for comfort for on a regular basis and feel that it's not serving them positively anymore, so Lauren, this is where I want to talk like, what is someone, I give you permission. What can someone do, what would we suggest in Balance365 to tackle emotional eating.

Lauren: Well, this is something that it's personal to everyone, so there's a lot of different techniques and tools and because everyone's different, right, different techniques work for different people for different reasons so I'll give a couple of the things that we recommend and one is putting a different, so emotion or having a bad day or whatever can be a trigger to want that comfort food so if you

put a different trigger where you're likely to see that, like on your fridge or on the kitchen counter, you can list a bunch of different activities that you might enjoy and it's right there, right when you get that trigger, so it just causes you to pause and be like, could I choose something else and you want to make that list of activities or other things you could do ahead of time so you're not trying to do it in the moment.

So that's one thing that works for some people and another one is trying to do something else without taking away the food, because food is comforting, so if you do something else while you're doing the food, while you're doing the food, while you're eating the food, you'll start to have, you'll start to look at those other activities and not feel deprived, like, "Oh yeah, I'm like taking a bath but really I want the cookies," you know I mean?

Jen: You're going to have the cookies and the bath. Do them together.

Lauren: Yeah. Or the cookies then the bath or-

Annie: A bath then the cookies.

Lauren: Yeah.

Annie: However you want it. No judgment from us three.

Jen: I want them in the bath. That's what I'm going to do.

Lauren: So those are a couple and that's not definitely that exhaustive, like there's many different techniques you can try.

Annie: Because the idea behind that, Lauren, is that eventually you would start to associate that same reward with the bath and not just the cookies.

Lauren: Right. Right.

Annie: That's the hopeful intended outcome, right?

Lauren: Yeah.

Annie: Yeah and this can take some practice and some trial and error and that's why we have a whole section of almost exclusively worksheets in the emotional eating chapter of Balance365 because it's so person specific and it's like, what

does this look like for you, like let's explore all the ways and try them and then see what works.

Jen: There's also a big difference between eating for comfort sometimes and emotional eating as a way to numb and not feel, right, like and I think a lot of people find themselves in that pattern where they are using food to just distract themselves and numb and not have to feel the feelings that are bubbling up for them at the end of the day kind of thing.

Annie: I feel like you were looking at me when you said that.

Jen: No.

Annie: I do do that. I do, feeling feelings is a lot of work.

Jen: It is. I've learned to cry a lot, like this year I have really amped up the crying but I find it really helps me processing so sometimes when I feel like I could just dive head first into a big bag of ketchup chips, I actually just really need to call somebody or talk to my partner and cry and just say like, "This is really hard for me right now" and process it all.

Annie: Yeah, which is one of the steps in the emotional eating workbook that like, what are you feeling? Like, what it? Like, can we can we put a word on it? Is that sadness? Is it anger? Is it stress? Is it overwhelm?

Jen: I would define, like comfort eating is like, "I want to feel these feelings," so when I'm sick and I want to bowl of soup, it's like I want to be closer to my grandma right now and emotional eating would be more like, "I don't want to feel anything right now. I don't want to feel anything. I want to just taste this food and distract myself with this food," kind of thing.

Annie: Or drink.

Jen: Or drink, like a lot of people get into that, yeah, like you have talked about this on the podcast, Annie, is that having a glass of wine or whatever might be some people's habit.

Annie: But I will share that I have not had a drink in 3 weeks.

Jen: Right.

Annie: Just as a trial, like I'm just kind of running my own little trial and error, like let's just see what this looks like and take what works and leave what doesn't and reassess.

Jen: Yeah, the other thing too is back to Traci Mann's study is that you could let some time pass and see how you feel, and if you feel "Oh, I'm fine, that passed" and I've actually find-

Lauren: That's another strategy in our book, too.

Annie: Later.

Lauren: Later. Like wait 15 minutes. If you still want it, go eat it-

Jen: And then move on with your life.

Lauren: You might find that you don't.

Jen: Right.

Lauren: Yeah.

Annie: Yeah. But, you know, I think Jen's point, to circle back to the beginning though, is if you want a food that you would classify as a comfort food, you don't need to label it comfort food just to eat it, just to allow yourself permission to eat it. You can eat it, just period. You don't need to, like, explain your food choices to us or anyone unless you really want to.

Jen: Right.

Annie: Yeah. OK, So in summary, there might be some conflicting data on comfort foods, the validity of them, if they really work, but I think we all can agree that there seems to be some sort of connection whether it's the associations we make with the smells or the people that served us the food or where we were at in our stage of life or who we were with when we were consuming those foods that could help us feel connected and like we belonged and that we were cared for and loved and if you find yourself engaging in eating comfort food regularly and it's distracting from your goals, that there are some strategies to re-learn those habits, right.

Jen: Yeah.

Lauren: Yeah.

Annie: Awesome, anything else you want to add before we pop off?

Jen: No.

Lauren: No.

Annie: OK. Me either.

Lauren: Another awkward ending.

Annie: We're batting like 30 for 30. Why break the streak now? Alright, thanks ladies.

Lauren: Bye.

Jen: Bye.