Weight loss program for emotional eaters: Physician manual

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Session 1: Emotional Eating

Objective: Discuss emotional eating. What emotions lead the patient to eat?

Homework: Keeping an emotional eating diary for 1 week.

Emotional Eating

Emotions can trigger overeating. We might eat when we are stressed, anxious, sad, or have other feelings that we want to cope with. Food helps to relieve these emotions. The more we do this, the more that emotional eating becomes a habit, making it that much more difficult to break.

I want you to think of the last time you overate, or ate more than usual. How were you feeling at that exact moment? Refer to the patient’s DEBQ responses to highlight the emotions that may trigger their emotional eating. If the patient is having difficulties identifying specific emotions that lead them to eat, work backwards and get them to describe situations in which they are most likely to overeat. Ask them about the physical sensations they feel when they are tempted to eat too much. Sometimes people are unaware of their emotions and so it can be helpful to tie these to physical symptoms of stress and anxiety. For example, tension in the neck and shoulders, racing heart, etc.

The thing about emotional eating is that it usually does not make us feel better. As much as we try to control our emotions by eating, we can’t. We can change what’s around us, but what is going on inside of us, our emotions, we cannot easily change. When we eat, we might feel better for a short time but it doesn’t last. Ask the patient if emotional eating actually helps to make them feel better. Try to get them to acknowledge that emotional eating isn’t helping.

Emotional eating can lead to weight gain and can make it more difficult to lose weight. Actually, numerous research studies have shown that emotional eaters are less successful at losing weight in traditional weight loss programs, because these programs do not target their emotional eating. But this program is different. The goal of this program is to give you strategies to reduce your emotional eating to help you lose weight, and keep it off in the long run.

Homework

Each session I will give you a homework sheet with what you have to work on before the next session. It is VERY IMPORTANT that you bring this sheet back with you. Define a strategy with the patient to make sure they put the homework sheet somewhere that they will remember to bring it back with them. For example, if they always carry a backpack with them, suggest that they keep it in their backpack so they will be sure to have it on them. You can also suggest that they put a reminder in their smartphone so they make extra sure that they don’t forget. This week I want you to keep an eating diary (see page X of handouts). Every time you overeat; times when you eat more than you think you should or eat until you are uncomfortably full, I want you to write it down. Then I want you to write down how you were feeling before you overate – what emotion made you eat more than you wanted or that you should (e.g., were you feeling sad, stressed, anxious, etc.?). Also pay attention to and write down how you felt after you ate (e.g. did you feel happier, calmer, less uneasy?). This diary will help you become more aware of the emotions that trigger you to overeat. It will also help us to know what emotions to target throughout the rest of the program so that they don’t lead to overeating. We will review the diary next session so be sure to bring it back with you.
Session 2: Values

Objective: Explain what values are. Explore values related to weight loss and connect this to emotional eating.

Homework: Writing down reasons for wanting to lose weight and how this is connected to emotional eating.

Review homework from session 1. Briefly go over the patient’s emotional eating diary to identify what emotions and situations they are most likely to eat in response to.

Values

Values are very important in our lives because they help us make meaningful choices. Today I want to talk about your values so that you can follow them to reduce emotional eating, and improve weight loss. To help clarify these values, I want you to answer the following two questions: Why do you want to lose weight? Why is weight loss so important to you? Briefly brainstorm and discuss this with patients to get a sense of what their values are. Emphasize values related to health (e.g., lowering blood pressure, risk of heart disease, risk of diabetes, etc.), especially the health concerns that led to their referral in the first place.

Once the patient has identified their reasons for losing weight and why this is important to them, discuss how this relates to emotional eating. Ask questions like:

How is emotional eating related to your weight loss?
Does it help or hinder your progress?
Is emotional eating in line with your weight loss values, or not? Why?

Provide patients with a summary of what they’ve told you by paraphrasing their answers and repeating them back to them.

Homework

Today we briefly discussed your values related to weight loss and emotional eating. This week, I want you to take some time to write down why you want to lose weight, and how emotional eating is related to this (See handouts, page X). You may write down some of the things we talked about today, or you may come up with other reasons why losing weight is important to you. Writing these values down is important so that you can refer back to them, especially when you aren’t feeling motivated. It is always important to remind yourself why you are here.

Additional discussion points if time permits:

- If the patient is having difficulties answering why they want to lose weight/why it is important to them, you can ask them how they would like to be viewed by others (specifically someone close to them like a good friend, spouse, partner, etc.). What values related to weight loss do they have that they want to be known for? If they cannot give answers provide prompts like family, health, being active, etc. This exercise can help to put their values into perspective.
Session 3: Using Values to Make Decisions

Objective: Teach the BOLD technique and how to use it to reduce emotional eating.

Homework: Journal a time when you used BOLD to reduce emotional eating.

Review

Last time we talked about your values related to losing weight, and how these connect to emotional eating. Sometimes when we are stressed or experience other difficult emotions, we stray away from these core values. It is very important to remember our values when we are ________ (insert whatever emotions the patient struggles with here) because these values will help you to stay focused on your weight loss goal and help you avoid emotional eating.

Introduce the BOLD technique

I’m going to teach you a technique that will help you to deal with the emotions that make you want to eat by remembering your values. The technique is called BOLD. Every time that you experience a negative emotion (customize this to the patient based on the emotions they have indicated eating in response to thus far), I want you to apply this acronym before acting on your urge to eat. This technique will help slow you down so that you don’t immediately react to distressing emotions. (Be sure to emphasize to use BOLD BEFORE eating because it helps you to SLOW DOWN).

BOLD stands for:

✦ B - Breath—Take a couple of breathes, slow down!
✦ O - Observe—Observe what you are feeling – are you tired or tense perhaps? Angry or bored?
✦ L - Listen to values—What are your values? Why do you want to lose weight?!
✦ D - Decide to eat or not to eat and how much. Decide in line with your values!

Doing this can help you to slow down and put distance between yourself and your emotions, so they don’t automatically lead you to eat.

Introduction to if-then plans

In order to help you change your habits (and reduce emotional eating), we are going to use another technique called “if-then plans.” This technique will give you a concrete action plan of what to do when you are faced with the urge to eat in response to emotions. That way you know that IF you experience an emotion that makes you want to eat, THEN you will have a plan in place to deal with this emotion without eating. Let’s try an if-then plan for this week.

Homework

This week, I want you to practice following the if-then plan, “IF I want to eat when I experience (insert emotion), THEN I will use BOLD.” When you use BOLD in response to an emotion, I would like you to go through the checklist (on page X) to make sure you check off all four steps of BOLD (Breathe, Observe, Listen, Decide). BOLD is a tool you can use to help reduce emotional eating going forward, so the more you practice it, the more it will become a habit.
Session 4: Acceptance

Objective: Discuss the concept of acceptance. Review the tug-of-war metaphor and brainstorm alternative ways to respond to negative emotions other than eating.

Homework: Practice dropping the rope and write about the experience of doing so.

Accepting Emotions

Negative emotions are an inevitable part of life. There will always be times when we are sad, stressed, or anxious. It is important to know that just because we are feeling negative emotions, it doesn’t mean that we have to act on them. The goal of today’s session is to teach you to accept negative emotions for what they are, rather than trying to get rid of them by eating.

Introduce Tug-of-War Metaphor

Every time you want to eat because of the emotions you are experiencing, think of this struggle like a tug-of-war between yourself and these certain emotions. It may help to think of your negative emotions as a storm you are battling against; the weather is unchangeable, just like your emotions. Rather than continuing to pull harder and harder on the rope to try and win against these emotions, what if you give up the struggle and just drop the rope? While the emotion may not go away, you won’t waste your time/energy trying to fight to get rid of it. If you think of your emotions like a storm, there’s no sense fighting against something you can’t change. You might actually find that the emotion is not so bad after all and that you are ok with it sitting there with you after you dropped the rope. So when you are experiencing negative emotions and have an urge to eat, think about dropping the rope, don’t fight back, and just sit with the emotion.

Responding to Negative Emotions Without Eating

After you have given up the tug-of-war struggle and dropped the rope, you can use the energy you have saved by not fighting your emotions to do other things to make yourself feel better rather than eat. For example, you could go for a walk to get fresh air and relieve stress or talk to a friend for support. Get patient to brainstorm alternative ways to respond to emotions, rather than eating. These ideas will be used to form their if-then plan for the session.

Homework

This week, when you feel the urge to eat in response to negative emotions, I want you to practice dropping the rope and responding to your negative emotions in a way that does not involve eating. Your if-then plan to do this will be “IF I feel (insert emotion), THEN I will practice dropping the rope and (insert alternative behaviour) instead of eating.” To go along with this, I want you to fill out the handout on page X describing a time when you practiced this. Write down what the experience was like. Note whether your urges to eat changed or went away. Note whether you were able to stop yourself from engaging in emotional eating by doing something else instead.
Session 5: Urge Surfing

Objective: Discuss the concept of urge surfing and how to practice it.

Homework: Practice urge surfing using the techniques provided.

Introduce Urge Surfing

Sometimes we will have the urge or craving to eat because of emotions we are feeling. We might have a craving for a specific food (like chips or chocolate), or we might have a craving for a general taste (like something sweet or something salty). However, just because the urge or craving is there doesn’t mean that you have to act on it. Think of an urge or a craving like a wave. There will be ebb and flow; it will come and go. Sometimes it will be stronger and sometimes it will be weaker. Urge surfing is like riding a wave. The goal is to become aware of your emotions and cravings, but to not try to fight them. Over time, you might begin to find that they naturally go away on their own, without you having to do anything to try and change them.

To practice urge surfing, you can follow 5 easy steps:

1. Acknowledge your urge or craving (“I’m having the urge to…” or “I’m craving…”)
2. Observe your urge or craving. Notice how it feels in your body (are you tense, anxious, fatigued, etc.?).
3. Rather than trying to make it go away, just sit with it for now.
4. Watch the urge or craving as it rises and falls like a wave, noticing as it gets stronger and then weaker. It may help to score the urge or craving on a scale from 1-10 (10 being the strongest) to see how it changes over time.
5. Check in with your values. Is acting on the urge or craving consistent with your values related to weight loss?

Homework

This week, when you feel the urge or craving to eat in response to negative emotions, I want you to practice urge surfing. Your if-then plan to do this will be “IF I feel (insert emotion), THEN I will practice urge surfing.” I want you to follow the five steps you learned today and fill out the handout on page X. Rate your urge/craving from 1 to 10 as it rises and falls. Write down what the experience was like. Note whether your urges/cravings to eat lessened or went away as a result.
Session 6: Mindful Eating

Objective: Explain mindful eating and do an exercise to practice it.

Homework: Practice mindful eating at home.

Mindful Eating

Often there are times when we don’t notice what we are eating because we are too busy, too tired, or too preoccupied with other things, like our emotions (stress, irritation, anxiety, etc.). This is what we call “mindless eating”. The opposite of mindless eating is mindful eating. Mindful eating is being totally focused on each sensation that happens while eating; chewing, tasting, swallowing, and savouring each bite. Mindful eating can help you to be more aware of your hunger and fullness, eat less food, reduce binge eating, and increase the pleasure you get out of eating. Let’s do an exercise to practice mindful eating.

Mindful Eating Exercise (use a piece of dark chocolate)

This exercise is an exaggeration of mindful eating, in order to help show you the importance of taking your time to enjoy your food. By being fully aware of what you are eating, and how you feel when eating, you will make better eating decisions and be more satisfied with your meal, and therefore less likely to overeat. Basically, for everything you eat, you can ask yourself mindfully whether or not it is worth it; whether the taste experience and the pleasure warrant its calories. The purpose of this activity is to exaggerate the act of tasting and eating by slowing down and focusing on all of the sensations associated with food and eating. The goal is to take your time to eat this chocolate mindfully. Give the patient 1 piece of dark chocolate

Before putting it in your mouth, take time to examine it. Take a mental note of what it looks like, and feels like. When you are ready, put the chocolate into your mouth. Try not to chew it right away. Instead, notice the way it feels in your mouth and on your tongue. Be aware of all of the sensations in your mouth; taste, texture, temperature, etc. When you start to chew, focus on how this feels and tastes. Note if you experience a different texture or flavour as you chew the chocolate. When you are done chewing, you can swallow. Notice how this feels. Finally, when you’ve finished swallowing, be aware of no longer feeling any sensation of the chocolate in your mouth. You can participate in this exercise with the patient if you wish to do so to help walk through it together.

Now you’ve got an idea of how to practice mindful eating. Does this make sense?

Homework

This week I want you to practice mindful eating at home. When you eat your favourite treats, I want you to take the time to eat them mindfully. You can use the if-then plan, “IF I want to eat my favourite treat ***insert name of food***, THEN I will practice eating it mindfully.” Just like we did with the exercise today, I want you to slow down and eat with all of your senses; take time to think about taste, texture, smell. You can write down how the food you ate mindfully tasted, felt, smelled, etc. and describe your experience with mindful eating in the handout on page X.
Session 7: Establishing Habits

Objective: Review the skills taught throughout the program to help reduce emotional eating and promote weight loss long term.

Homework: Make your own if-then plan related to not engaging in emotional eating.

All of the homework that has been given up to this point will be most effective if it is practiced routinely such that it becomes a habit. Decreasing emotional eating and improving weight goes beyond the program and the skills you learn here can be used indefinitely. There is no quick fix solution to weight loss, which makes it important to focus on applying skills consistently over the long term to manage emotional eating and weight going forward throughout your life.

Let’s review some of the skills we’ve covered over the past several weeks. First, we discussed the values that you hold related to weight loss and emotional eating. I taught you to use BOLD (Breathe, Observe, Listen, Decide) to slow down in the face of emotional eating, and to remember your values before choosing whether or not to eat. We also discussed the importance of accepting your emotions for what they are, rather than trying to change them (remind them of dropping the rope). Similar to this, we talked about riding your urges and cravings (urge surfing) to see if they go away on their own without acting on them by eating. Finally, last time we talked about mindful eating, to help you truly enjoy the act of eating and experience all of the sensations associated with it and figuring out whether a food is worth its calories.

Which of these techniques have you found most useful? Have some worked better than others at helping you to not eat in response to emotions? Which do you find easiest to use? Which are most difficult? Encourage them to continue practicing these techniques, especially the ones they find most effective. Manage discussion based on the amount of time that is available for the session.

Like I said earlier, these are all skills you can use not only now, but also long after the program’s completion. You can basically use them for life, or until they have become a habit and you no longer need to think about them. With practice, these skills can consistently help you to reduce emotional eating and therefore promote weight loss and weight maintenance.

Homework

Encourage patient to revisit some of the if-then plans from earlier sessions and tailor them based on what they have learned. In past sessions, I provided you with if-then plans of what to do when you are tempted to eat when you experience negative emotions. Now that you have a better idea of the specific techniques that help you to not eat in response to emotions, I want you to narrow down the if-then plans that work best for you. You can tailor them based on what you know works best for you (i.e., choosing specific techniques for specific emotions). For example, IF you are stressed, THEN you might use BOLD to slow down and not eat impulsively, whereas IF you are angry, THEN you might use urge surfing to explore your anger and see how it changes on its own. You can personalize your if-then plans and write them on page X. Remember to review your homework for the previous sessions to remind yourself of which if-then plans worked best to help reduce your emotional eating. We will review these plans next week so you can continue to use them going forward, so be sure to bring them with you to our next session.
Session 8: Commitment to Values

Objective: Discuss setbacks, loss of motivation, and ways to stay committed to weight loss by not engaging in emotional eating.

Homework: Make a summary card with patient in-session.

Setbacks and loss of motivation are normal. They happen to everyone and are an inevitable part of weight loss. In a way, weight loss is like hiking a mountain. For a while, it feels like the hike is never going to end and there is no way that you will make it to the top. But once you get out of the trees, you can see a clear path to the summit and know that you are going in the right direction. Success isn’t all about the final outcome (in this case, making it to the top of the mountain). You can also achieve success along the way. It’s like the old saying, “it’s not about the destination, it’s about the journey.” The journey won’t always be easy, or smooth, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get where you want to go eventually if you set your mind to it.

Discuss potential setbacks that patients have had or think that they might have in the future related to their emotional eating and weight loss. Remind them of their if-then plans to target various emotions that lead to eating using strategies like BOLD, urge surfing, etc. from previous sessions. Manage discussion based on the amount of time that is available for the session. Overall it is important to convey that setbacks are normal and inevitable. What matters is reacting to these setbacks proactively to prevent them from leading to more setbacks.

Ways to stay committed

If you feel like you are struggling to use your if-then plans to not engage in emotional eating, it is important to remember your values and goals. Think back to our early session on values. You wrote down reasons why you want to lose weight and stop engaging in emotional eating. It can help to think of these values when you experience a setback, because it helps to remind you why you want to lose weight and why emotional eating is inconsistent with your weight loss values.

Homework (done in-session)

This week, as we finish off, I want to review the if-then plans you came up with for your homework last week (go through their plans and make sure they are all structured in the format, “IF I experience a particular emotion, THEN I will use one of the techniques learned in this program to not engage in emotional eating” and restructure if necessary. You can also review their homework from previous sessions to see what if-then plans they reported being most useful for them and make sure these plans go on their summary card). We are going to write these plans on a summary card so that you can refer back to this card when you are feeling a lack of motivation, or experience a setback (see page X). As you can see on the summary card, throughout this program you have learned skills to stick to your values of reducing emotional eating to help you lose weight. In order to stay true to these values, you can use the if-then plans that you have decided work best for you (get patients to write their if-then plans on the summary card). Keep this card where you can see it, so that it acts as a constant reminder of your values to reduce your emotional eating and lose weight. When setbacks occur, refer back to your summary card and use it to help motivate you to keep going in the right direction towards your values of losing weight and not eating when emotional.
References


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