



**Discussion Questions for *Eating, Drinking, Overthinking:  
The Toxic Triangle of Food, Alcohol, and Depression  
and How Women Can Break Free*  
by Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, Ph.D.**

1. The book begins with a case study of Jill, whose behavior swings from being tightly controlled to being wildly uncontrolled, without a healthy middle ground. What did you discover about Jill's history and sense of self? What enabled her to accept treatment and to stand up to her father as described at the end of the book?
2. Did the patterns outlined in the first chapter resonate with you or remind you of someone close to you? Is your community one in which the toxic triangle could easily go unrecognized?
3. What are the best ways to determine whether a form of self-focused coping is beneficial or destructive? How does society contribute to a woman's belief that she must internalize and mask her emotions?
4. Discuss the ways in which the three components of the toxic triangle—yo-yo eating,
  1. binge drinking, and depressive symptoms—become so integrated that it is impossible to treat just one component individually. What has prevented clinicians and pharmaceutical companies from recognizing the triangle as a whole?
5. What are the effects when the toxic triangle reverberates throughout a woman's relationships, whether with her family, friends, or co-workers? How can we recognize the difference between those relationships that perpetuate illness and those that might be genuinely helpful?
6. Discuss the gender distinctions raised by Dr. Susan Nolen-Hoeksema, from the fact that men and women generally can't tolerate the same quantities of alcohol to ways in which women are socialized to ignore their anger. Do these distinctions ring true in your family?
7. *Eating, Drinking, and Overthinking* is based on Dr. Nolen-Hoeksema's extensive original research, including a long-term study of more than 1,300 participants ranging in age from twenty-five to seventy-five. How do the results of her scientific inquiries compare to the notions you previously had about eating disorders, alcoholism, and overthinking among women?
8. While reading the book, what did you discover about the role of brain chemistry and hormones in affecting moods and addictions? How much of the toxic triangle seems to be driven by nature, and how much by nurture?

9. The statistics regarding the toxic triangle are compelling. As many as 80 percent of women with symptoms of one “side” of the toxic triangle also experience symptoms of the other two; one in four women will suffer a severe depressive episode in her life while more than 50 percent of women experience mild symptoms of depression occasionally; one in five women in the United States exhibit signs of alcohol abuse. In addition, binge eating and excessive dieting are rampant—32 percent of college-age women say they binge at least twice a month, while 45 percent of adult women say they are chronically on a diet. How does your personal experience compare to these statistics? What can be done to make more Americans aware of the toxic triangle’s prevalence?
10. Adolescence is presented as a major period of vulnerability for girls who are in danger of falling victim to the toxic triangle. Was your adolescence marked by any or all elements of the triangle? Do you believe that girls coming-of-age in the twenty-first century face a greater vulnerability than those in previous generations?
11. Discuss the many coping strategies outlined by the author to keep negative thoughts from gaining an advantage. What are the keys to overcoming roadblocks that interfere with the creation of authentic, supportive friendships? What rituals or visualizations would (or do) enhance your sense of balance and help you manage negative thoughts? What “false gods” have you had to topple in your life?
12. From urge surfing to mindfulness to using a diary, Dr. Nolen-Hoeksema offers numerous techniques for embarking on the road to recovery. What elements do these first steps have in common? What liberating forces will they unleash?
13. Describe the Positive You and the Real You as explored in chapter seven. What does Trin’s story indicate about the dangers of, and reasons for, trying to obliterate the authentic self? Why is assertiveness so essential in the process of self-discovery? With whom do you most want to be more assertive?
14. In her previous book, *Women Who Think Too Much*, Dr. Nolen-Hoeksema focused on the debilitating tendency to ruminate so intensely that it leads to emotional paralysis. What function does this tendency serve, and what causes this function to sometimes extend itself into the realm of eating disorders and binge drinking? What similarities and differences exist in the necessary treatment paths outlined in both books?
15. What actions can we take to channel our daughters’ strengths, as discussed in the last chapter? What destructive beliefs will be the most difficult to challenge? What are the most healing gifts awaiting young women today?