

An Essential Guide to Supporting Autistic Clients with Eating Differences

A Neuroaffirming Checklist for Dietitians Working With Eating Differences in Adolescents and Adults

Before the First Session

- Send photos of your office and a simple outline of what to expect
- Offer choice of communication methods (email, verbal, writing)
- Ask about sensory needs (lighting, sounds, seating preferences)

Assessment Essentials

- Use clear, specific language ("eat 1 cup of rice" rather than "eat a serving")
- Document exact brands, presentations, and preparations that work
- Ask about successful meals and what makes them successful
- Note specific food requirements (temperature, texture, separation needs)
- Record environmental preferences (noise level, lighting, seating)

Treatment Strategies

- Start with what works - build on currently accepted foods
- Use food chaining: make very small changes to accepted foods Example: plain pasta → same pasta with butter → pasta with minimal sauce. The progression should be developed in a collaborative manner with the client. An alternative to food chaining is to explore foods that are similar from a sensory perspective and invite the client to trial these. Example: If a client likes smooth pumpkin soup, consider other options such as smooth cauliflower soup or smooth potato soup. If nutritional adequacy is a concern explore food fortification strategies for example adding evaporated milk to the soup.
- Keep "safe foods" available during all changes
- Use visual tools (photos, charts, checklists) when introducing changes
- Break down all changes into small, specific steps

Practical Support

- Create visual shopping lists with specific brands and photos
- Develop clear routines for meals and snacks
- Use photos to show correct portion sizes and food presentations
- Provide step-by-step instructions with pictures for food preparation
- Keep backup meal plans ready for difficult days

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Communication Tips

- Give time to process information and questions
- Provide written summaries of key points discussed
- Use concrete examples rather than abstract concepts
- Share information in multiple formats (written, visual, verbal)
- Check understanding by asking for specific feedback

Neuroaffirming Non-Negotiables

- Focus on client's strengths rather than perceived deficits
- Recognise food selectivity as a valid response to sensory experiences
- Avoid pressuring to make eye contact or mask autistic traits
- Respect and accommodate communication preferences
- Use identity-first language if preferred ("autistic person" vs "person with autism")
- Acknowledge and validate sensory experiences
- Support self-advocacy and autonomy in food choices
- Recognise stimming as a valid form of self-regulation

Remember

- Progress looks different for each person
- Small changes can be big achievements
- Consistency and predictability are crucial
- Always have backup plans ready
- Celebrate any step forward, no matter how small

Quick Troubleshooting Guide

- If food is refused: Check if presentation matches usual preference
- If new food is rejected: Return to last successful version
- If stress increases: Reduce demands and return to familiar foods
- If routine is disrupted: Use visual schedules to reestablish structure
- If overwhelmed: Provide quiet space and return to safe foods

