

UNDERSTANDING SENSORY PROCESSING AND FOOD

Why Eating Can Feel Completely Different

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A compassionate exploration of how the nervous system can shape appetite, food safety, eating environments and our relationship with ourselves.

Introduction

For many people, eating is one of the simplest parts of the day. They prepare a meal, sit down, eat, and move on with life without giving it much thought.

For others, eating can feel like one of the most challenging experiences they face.

The smell of food may become overwhelming before they have even sat down. The texture of a particular food may cause an immediate gag reflex. Bright lights, background conversations, clattering plates and multiple smells in a restaurant may leave them feeling so overwhelmed that eating becomes almost impossible.

To someone looking in from the outside, it can appear confusing. Friends, family members and even professionals may assume the person is simply being **fussy**, stubborn or refusing to try.

Yet for many autistic people, people with ADHD, individuals with ARFID (Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder), and others with sensory processing differences, these experiences are very real. They are not behavioural choices. They are the result of a nervous system processing sensory information differently.

Understanding sensory processing changes the conversation.

Instead of asking:
"Why won't they just eat it?"

We begin asking:
"What is their nervous system experiencing?"

That single question moves us away from judgement and towards compassion. This article explores how sensory processing influences our relationship with food, why eating is one of the most sensory-demanding activities we do, and how understanding these differences can improve both nutrition and mental wellbeing.

My Thoughts

When I was growing up, nobody talked about sensory processing.

If you struggled with food, you were labelled: **fussy, difficult, awkward, picky.**

I heard all of those words.

Like many autistic adults diagnosed later in life, I spent years believing those labels. I could not explain why some foods made me feel physically uncomfortable before they even reached my mouth. I could not explain why a smell could instantly remove my appetite or why a busy restaurant sometimes felt far more exhausting than enjoyable.

I simply assumed everyone else was coping better than I was.

Receiving my autism and ADHD diagnosis in adulthood did not suddenly change my sensory experiences, but it completely changed how I understood them.

There was not something wrong with me. My brain was simply processing the world differently.

That understanding has transformed the way I work as a psychotherapist.

Many of the people I meet have spent years apologising for their relationship with food. They have forced themselves to eat foods that make them gag. They have avoided social situations because they were embarrassed about what they can and cannot eat. They have hidden their difficulties because they were frightened of being judged.

The sadness is that many of them believe they are failing. In reality, they are often doing something remarkable: navigating a world that was not designed with their nervous system in mind.

When we understand sensory processing, we stop trying to force people to fit into the world and instead begin thinking about how the world can better support them. That small shift changes everything.

What Is Sensory Processing?

Every second of every day your brain receives an extraordinary amount of information.

Without you consciously thinking about it, your nervous system is constantly asking questions: How bright is the room? Is that sound important? Am I too hot? Am I hungry? Where are my feet? How tightly am I holding this cup? Can I smell smoke? Is someone standing too close to me?

Your brain receives millions of pieces of sensory information every moment. One of its most important jobs is deciding which information deserves your attention and which can safely fade into the background. This process is known as **sensory processing**.

For many people this filtering happens automatically. The ticking clock disappears into the background. The label inside a T-shirt stops being noticeable. The hum of a fridge fades away. The smell of another person's lunch becomes easy to ignore.

For some people, however, this filtering process works differently. Sensory information may feel more intense: sounds may seem louder, lights brighter, textures rougher and smells stronger. Alternatively, some sensations may be less noticeable, leading a person to seek additional sensory input.

Neither response is wrong. They simply reflect different ways that individual nervous systems process the world.

The Brain Is Constantly Organising Information

Imagine walking into a busy cafe. Within seconds your brain is processing conversations, coffee machines, clinking cutlery, scraping chairs, bright menu boards, food smells, temperature, music, clothing, hunger, the chair beneath you, your emotional state and social expectations.

Most people barely notice this incredible amount of information because their brains organise it automatically.

For someone with sensory processing differences, much of this information may arrive with equal importance. Instead of filtering background information, the nervous system continues trying to process everything simultaneously.

Imagine trying to have a conversation while twenty televisions are playing different programmes around you. That gives a small glimpse into what sensory overload can sometimes feel like.

Beyond the Five Senses

Many of us grew up learning that humans have five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. Modern neuroscience tells us that our sensory system is more complex. Understanding the additional senses is particularly important when we explore eating and nutrition.

Vision

Vision is not simply about seeing food. It includes colour, brightness, movement, contrast and visual complexity. For some people, food that looks different from expected immediately feels unsafe. A slight colour change in a favourite yoghurt or different packaging on a familiar product may create anxiety before tasting even begins.

Hearing

Eating environments are full of sound: people talking, children shouting, cutlery scraping, chewing, music and kitchen equipment. For someone experiencing auditory sensitivity, these sounds can become overwhelming long before food reaches the table.

Taste

Taste involves recognising sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami flavours. However, taste alone rarely explains food preferences. Much of what we describe as flavour actually comes from smell and texture.

Smell

Smell has a powerful connection with emotion and memory. A pleasant smell can stimulate appetite; an overwhelming smell can remove it instantly. For some individuals, the smell of fish, eggs, certain spices or even someone else's meal may be so intense that eating becomes impossible.

Touch

Touch influences eating far more than many people realise. Every bite provides information about texture, temperature, moisture, pressure, crispness, smoothness and stickiness. For someone with tactile sensitivities, these sensations may determine whether a food feels safe long before nutritional value is considered.

The Three Hidden Senses

Alongside the traditional five senses are three sensory systems that many people have never heard of. Yet they influence eating every single day.

Proprioception

Proprioception tells your brain where your body is in space. It helps you judge how hard to bite, how firmly to hold cutlery and how much force to use when chewing. Without conscious thought, it allows eating to feel coordinated and controlled.

Some neurodivergent people actively seek proprioceptive input, enjoying foods that provide strong resistance such as chewy bagels, crunchy vegetables or tough meats because they give clear feedback to the muscles and joints. Others may find these foods exhausting or uncomfortable.

Vestibular Processing

The vestibular system, located within the inner ear, helps us understand movement, balance and head position. Although we rarely associate balance with eating, vestibular processing influences posture, body stability and overall regulation. When this system is overwhelmed, concentrating on eating may become far more difficult.

Interoception

Perhaps the most fascinating sensory system of all is **interoception**. It allows us to notice what is happening inside our bodies: hunger, fullness, thirst, nausea, pain, temperature, fatigue, a racing heart and anxiety.

For many autistic people and people with ADHD, interoceptive awareness may work differently. Some people do not notice they are hungry until they suddenly feel faint. Others struggle to recognise fullness until they have overeaten. Some confuse anxiety with hunger, or hunger with nausea.

Understanding interoception helps explain why eating patterns can differ so significantly between individuals. Most importantly, it reminds us that eating is not simply a matter of choice. It is deeply connected to how our brains interpret the signals our bodies send us.

A gentle reminder

A person's safe foods, preferred textures or need for a quieter eating space are forms of communication. Curiosity, predictability and compassion create far more safety than pressure ever can.

This resource is educational and is not a substitute for individual medical, nutritional or mental-health advice. If eating difficulties are affecting health, growth, hydration or daily life, please seek appropriately qualified support.

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