

PART 2 OF 2

THE ENVIRONMENT AROUND FOOD

HOW LIGHT, NOISE, SMELL AND SOCIAL
EXPECTATIONS INFLUENCE EATING

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How Light, Noise, Smell and Social Expectations Influence Eating - Part 2 of 2

Family Meals: More Than Just Eating Together

Family mealtimes are often seen as an important part of family life. They can be a time to connect, share stories and enjoy one another's company.

For some people, however, family meals are one of the most demanding parts of the day.

There may be multiple conversations happening at once. Chairs scrape across the floor, cutlery clatters against plates, televisions play in the background and people move around the kitchen. Alongside all of this, there can be expectations to make eye contact, answer questions, try new foods and follow social rules.

For a nervous system already working hard to process sensory information, this can feel overwhelming.

Children may become restless or leave the table. Teenagers may avoid family meals altogether. Adults may feel emotionally exhausted before the meal has even finished.

This is not because they do not value family time. Often, they are simply trying to cope with an environment that demands far more from their nervous system than others may realise.

The Hidden Pressure of Social Expectations

Food is deeply connected to culture, celebration and relationships.

We celebrate birthdays with cake, meet friends for coffee and gather around tables during holidays and special occasions.

Because food is so social, there can be enormous pressure to eat in ways that make other people feel comfortable.

Many people have heard comments such as:

"Just have one bite."
"Do not be rude."
"Everyone else is eating it."
"You are too old to be fussy."

Although usually well intentioned, these comments can increase anxiety rather than encourage eating.

When eating becomes associated with pressure or embarrassment, the nervous system begins to anticipate stress before the meal has even started.

Over time this can reinforce avoidance rather than confidence.

Masking at Mealtimes

Many autistic adults describe spending years masking during meals.

They force themselves to eat foods that feel overwhelming. They hide discomfort to avoid questions. They copy the eating habits of those around them. They stay at the table even when every part of their nervous system is asking for a break.

Masking can help someone appear as though they are coping. It does not mean they feel comfortable.

The emotional cost of constantly hiding sensory distress can be significant.

Many people describe leaving restaurants feeling completely drained - not because of the conversation, but because of the effort involved in appearing “normal.”

Creating environments where people feel able to express their needs without judgement can reduce this burden enormously.

Restaurants, Cafes and Supermarkets

Eating outside the home introduces a whole new set of sensory demands.

Restaurants often combine:

- Bright or changing lighting.
- Loud background music.
- Crowded spaces.
- Strong food smells.
- Unfamiliar menus.
- Waiting staff approaching unexpectedly.
- Busy visual surroundings.

For someone with sensory processing differences, this can become a perfect storm of competing information.

Supermarkets present similar challenges.

The bright lights, crowded aisles, refrigeration noise, tannoy announcements and constant movement can quickly overwhelm the senses.

Some people arrive home completely exhausted - not because shopping is physically demanding, but because their brain has spent the entire time processing an overwhelming amount of sensory input.

Recognising this helps explain why online shopping, quieter eating venues or visiting shops during less busy times can make such a positive difference.

Stress, the Nervous System and Digestion

When we feel calm and safe, our parasympathetic nervous system - sometimes called the “rest and digest” system - supports digestion.

Blood flow is directed towards the digestive system. Appetite increases. Digestion becomes more efficient.

When we feel threatened or overwhelmed, the sympathetic nervous system prepares the body for action.

Heart rate increases. Muscles tense. Breathing changes. Digestion becomes less of a priority.

This response is designed to protect us in dangerous situations, but the brain does not always distinguish between physical danger and sensory overwhelm.

For someone experiencing intense sensory input, their nervous system may respond as though it needs to stay alert rather than relax.

Understanding this helps us appreciate why creating calm environments can support healthier eating experiences.

In My Therapy Room

One of the most common things I hear is:

“I thought I was just awkward.”

Clients often tell me they have spent years avoiding restaurants, declining invitations or feeling guilty because family meals felt so difficult.

When we begin exploring the environment rather than focusing solely on the food, everything changes.

A parent once described how their child suddenly began eating more after moving from the busy kitchen to a quieter corner of the house.

Another client realised that eating lunch in their parked car before returning to work felt far more manageable than sitting in a noisy staff room.

Neither person needed to “try harder.” They needed an environment that worked with their nervous system instead of against it.

These small adjustments may seem simple, but they can have a profound impact on confidence, wellbeing and nutrition.

Maggie's Reflection

One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that supporting someone does not always mean changing the person.

Sometimes it means changing the environment.

When we reduce unnecessary sensory demands, we create space for people to succeed without forcing them to constantly battle their own nervous system.

That is not lowering expectations. It is recognising that everyone deserves the opportunity to thrive in an environment that meets their needs.

Practical Strategies

There is no perfect eating environment, but small changes can make a significant difference.

You might consider:

- Turning off background television or music during meals.
- Using softer lighting where possible.
- Choosing quieter cafes or restaurants.
- Visiting shops outside peak times.
- Allowing someone to sit where they feel most comfortable.
- Respecting the need for sensory breaks during longer meals.
- Avoiding pressure to try unfamiliar foods in stressful environments.
- Offering predictable routines around mealtimes.
- Using noise-reducing headphones before or after overwhelming environments if helpful.
- Focusing on connection rather than how much someone eats.

The aim is not to remove every sensory experience. It is to reduce unnecessary barriers so the nervous system has more capacity to engage with eating.

Myth vs Reality

Myth: “If they were really hungry, the environment would not matter.”

Reality: Sensory environments have a direct impact on the nervous system. When someone feels overwhelmed by noise, light, smells or social pressure, appetite can decrease and eating can become significantly more difficult. Addressing the environment is often just as important as addressing the food itself.

Research Snapshot

Research continues to demonstrate that sensory-friendly environments improve participation and reduce distress for many autistic people and individuals with sensory processing differences.

Studies have shown that reducing environmental stressors - such as excessive noise, unpredictable sensory input and social pressure - can improve eating experiences and increase willingness to engage with meals.

This reinforces an important message: successful eating is influenced not only by nutrition, but by creating environments where people feel safe, understood and regulated.

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to consider:

- Where do I feel most comfortable eating?
- Are there places I avoid because they feel overwhelming?
- Which sensory experiences affect my appetite most?
- Do I notice differences in how I eat at home compared with when I am out?
- What one small environmental change could make mealtimes easier?

There are no right or wrong answers. These questions are invitations to become more curious about your own experiences.

Key Takeaways

- Eating is influenced by the environment as much as the food itself.
- Sensory input such as light, noise, smells and physical comfort can affect appetite.
- Feeling safe supports digestion and eating.
- Social pressure can increase anxiety and reduce food intake.
- Masking sensory distress can be exhausting.
- Small environmental changes often have a significant impact.
- Understanding replaces judgement with compassion.

Before You Go...

The next time you see someone struggling to eat, pause before assuming the problem is the food.

Look around. Notice the lights. Listen to the noise. Think about the smells. Consider the social expectations in the room.

Ask yourself whether their nervous system is being asked to manage far more than simply eating.

For many people, changing the environment is the first step towards changing their relationship with food.

As both a psychotherapist and someone with lived experience of autism and ADHD, I have learned that compassion begins with curiosity.

When we stop asking, “Why will they not eat?” and start asking, “What might be making eating difficult?”, we open the door to understanding, acceptance and meaningful support.

Sometimes the most powerful intervention is not changing the person.

It is changing the space around them.

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This resource is educational and is not a substitute for individual medical, nutritional or mental-health advice. Seek appropriately qualified support if eating difficulties affect health, growth, hydration or daily life.