

PART 2 OF 2

TEXTURE, TASTE AND SAFE FOODS

UNDERSTANDING WHY SOME
FOODS FEEL IMPOSSIBLE

By Maggie Learoyd



Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Founder of Space to Breathe Therapy

Texture, Taste and Safe Foods

Understanding Why Some Foods Feel Impossible - Part 2 of 2

When Food Feels Unsafe

One of the most important things we can understand about sensory eating is that there is a significant difference between not wanting to eat a food and not feeling able to eat it.

These two experiences can look similar from the outside, but they feel completely different on the inside.

When food feels unsafe, the body may respond automatically.

Someone may:

- Gag before the food reaches their mouth.
- Feel nauseous.
- Turn their head away.
- Become tearful.
- Feel anxious.
- Freeze.
- Panic.
- Lose their appetite altogether.

These reactions are not deliberate.

They are protective responses from the nervous system.

Just as someone might instinctively pull their hand away from something hot, a person experiencing intense sensory discomfort cannot simply choose to ignore what their brain is telling them.

Recognising this difference changes the conversation from “Why will they not eat?” to “What is making this food feel unsafe?”

Understanding the Gag Reflex

Many people assume that gagging only happens when food physically touches the back of the throat.

For some individuals with sensory sensitivities, the gag reflex can be triggered much earlier.

It may begin because of:

- The smell of a food.
- Seeing a particular texture.
- Anticipating how the food will feel.
- Feeling anxious before taking a bite.

This can be incredibly frustrating for the person experiencing it.

They may genuinely want to eat the food but find that their body reacts before they have any conscious control.

Repeated experiences like this can lead to increasing anxiety around mealtimes.

Over time, the list of foods that feel safe may become smaller, not because someone is choosing to restrict their diet, but because their nervous system is trying to protect them from distress.

Anxiety and the Cycle of Food Avoidance

When eating repeatedly leads to discomfort, the brain begins to learn from those experiences.

It starts predicting that eating will be difficult.

The next time a similar food appears, anxiety increases before the first bite.

This creates a cycle:

Unpleasant sensory experience to anxiety to avoidance to temporary relief to increased anxiety next time.

This is how food avoidance can become reinforced.

The avoidance makes sense because it reduces distress in the short term.

However, it can also make trying new foods feel even more frightening in the future.

Breaking this cycle requires patience, understanding and a sense of safety, not pressure.

Why Pressure Rarely Works

Parents often tell me they have tried everything.

Reward charts. Negotiating. Encouragement. Bribery. Insisting on “just one bite.”

Although these approaches are usually offered with the best intentions, pressure often increases the nervous system's sense of threat.

The more anxious someone becomes, the harder eating feels.

Instead of building confidence, pressure can unintentionally strengthen food anxiety.

This does not mean giving up on supporting someone.

It means changing the way we provide that support.

Confidence grows through safety, trust and positive experiences, not fear.

Expanding Safe Foods Gently

Many people worry that accepting safe foods means someone will never eat a wider variety of foods.

In reality, safe foods are often the starting point for progress.

Rather than removing them, we can build from them.

For example:

If someone enjoys smooth yoghurt, they might first explore different flavours before introducing very small pieces of fruit.

If they enjoy one brand of pasta, they may gradually become familiar with another shape or brand.

If toast feels safe, different toppings might be explored one at a time.

The pace should always respect the individual's nervous system.

Progress is rarely measured by how many foods are eaten.

It is measured by how safe eating begins to feel.

In My Therapy Room

One of the first things I tell clients and parents is that our goal is not to “fix” someone.

Our goal is to understand them.

I have worked with children who had been described as impossible at mealtimes, only to discover they were overwhelmed by the smell of cooked vegetables.

I have supported teenagers who were embarrassed to eat lunch at school because they knew people would comment on their limited range of foods.

I have met adults who had spent decades believing they were childish because they still relied on familiar meals.

When they finally understood sensory processing, many described feeling enormous relief.

Nothing about them had suddenly changed.

But their story had.

Instead of seeing themselves as difficult, they began seeing themselves as people with genuine sensory needs.

That shift in understanding is often where meaningful change begins.

Maggie's Reflection

One of the greatest privileges of my work is watching shame begin to disappear.

When someone realises that their eating difficulties are not a character flaw but a reflection of how their nervous system experiences the world, they often become much kinder to themselves.

Self-compassion creates space for growth.

Shame rarely does.

Practical Strategies

Supporting someone with sensory eating differences does not require perfection.

It requires patience, curiosity and flexibility.

Some helpful strategies include:

- Respect safe foods rather than removing them.
- Introduce change gradually.
- Explore new foods without expecting them to be eaten immediately.
- Allow someone to smell, touch or look at a food before tasting it.
- Reduce pressure during mealtimes.
- Celebrate curiosity rather than focusing only on eating.
- Keep mealtimes predictable where possible.
- Remember that progress is rarely linear.

The goal is not to create a perfect eater.

The goal is to help someone feel increasingly safe around food.

Myth vs Reality

Myth: "They are just being fussy."

Reality: Sensory food avoidance is very different from ordinary food preferences. For many autistic people, individuals with ADHD and those with ARFID, texture, smell, appearance and predictability create genuine neurological responses. These reactions are not attention-seeking or defiance. They reflect how the brain processes sensory information.

Research Snapshot

Research consistently demonstrates that sensory sensitivity plays a significant role in food acceptance for many autistic individuals and people with ARFID.

Studies suggest that supportive, low-pressure approaches are associated with better long-term outcomes than strategies based on coercion or repeated pressure.

The evidence increasingly supports person-centred interventions that build trust, respect sensory differences and work collaboratively with individuals and families.

Reflection Questions

Take a moment to reflect on your own experiences.

- Are there foods you avoid because of texture rather than taste?
- Do you have foods that always feel safe?
- How do you feel when someone pressures you to eat?

- Does your eating change depending on how stressed or overwhelmed you feel?
- If you support someone else, what might their nervous system be trying to communicate?

Curiosity is often far more powerful than judgement.

Key Takeaways

- Texture is often more important than taste.
- Safe foods provide predictability and reduce anxiety.
- Sensory food avoidance is a neurological experience, not a behavioural choice.
- Pressure often increases distress rather than improving eating.
- Small, respectful steps are more effective than forcing change.
- Understanding sensory processing helps replace shame with self-compassion.
- Building trust is one of the most effective ways to support eating confidence.

Before You Go...

If there is one message I hope stays with you after reading this article, it is this:

People rarely choose fear.

If a food feels impossible, there is usually a reason.

That reason may not be visible to others, but it is very real to the person experiencing it.

Instead of asking someone to ignore what their nervous system is telling them, we can begin by listening.

We can become curious about texture instead of criticising food choices.

We can value safe foods for the stability they provide rather than seeing them as obstacles.

Most importantly, we can remember that meaningful change happens through trust, not force.

Whether you are supporting a child, teenager, adult or recognising yourself within these pages, know that progress does not have to begin with a mouthful of food.

Sometimes it begins with understanding.

And from understanding comes compassion.

From compassion comes confidence.

And from confidence comes the possibility of lasting change.

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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.