

PART 1 OF 2

TEXTURE, TASTE AND SAFE FOODS

UNDERSTANDING WHY SOME
FOODS FEEL IMPOSSIBLE

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Space to Breathe Therapy

Texture, Taste and Safe Foods

Understanding Why Some Foods Feel Impossible - Part 1 of 2

Introduction

Have you ever wondered why someone will happily eat one brand of chicken nuggets but refuse another, even though they appear almost identical?

Why a child will eat strawberries one day but reject them the next?

Why someone can tolerate crunchy foods but gag at mashed potato?

Or why changing the shape of pasta can suddenly make a familiar meal feel impossible to eat?

To someone who has never experienced sensory differences around food, these reactions can seem confusing. They are often labelled as “fussy eating,” “stubbornness,” or “being difficult.”

Yet for many autistic people, people with ADHD, individuals with sensory processing differences and those living with Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), these reactions are not choices.

They are genuine sensory experiences.

Food is far more than flavour.

Every bite has a texture, temperature, smell, sound, appearance and even a level of predictability. Our brains combine all of this information in a fraction of a second before deciding whether something feels safe enough to eat.

When those sensory systems work differently, eating can become one of the most challenging activities of the day.

Understanding texture, taste and safe foods helps us replace judgement with curiosity and support people in ways that build confidence rather than fear.

My Thoughts

Growing up, people often assumed I was simply a “picky eater.”

I was not.

I desperately wanted eating to be easy.

What other people could not see was the internal battle that happened before every mouthful.

Some foods felt completely manageable. Others felt impossible.

It was not about whether they were healthy or unhealthy. It was not about whether I liked them. It was about how they felt in my mouth.

Some textures made me gag instantly. Others felt unpredictable, and that unpredictability created anxiety long before the food reached my lips.

For years I believed this meant something was wrong with me.

Now I understand that my brain was processing sensory information differently.

As a psychotherapist, I hear similar stories every week.

Children who are criticised for refusing vegetables. Teenagers who avoid eating with friends because they worry people will comment on their food choices. Adults who still feel embarrassed ordering the same meal every time they visit a restaurant.

When we understand the role sensory processing plays, these experiences stop looking like defiance.

They begin to make sense.

Food Is a Full Sensory Experience

Every mouthful of food provides the brain with an enormous amount of information.

Without consciously thinking about it, your brain is asking questions such as:

- What does it look like?
- What does it smell like?
- How does it feel in my hand?
- Is it hot or cold?
- Is it crunchy, smooth or chewy?
- Is it dry or moist?
- Does it make a sound when I bite it?
- Is it the same as I expected?

Within seconds, your nervous system decides whether that food feels safe.

For some people this process happens automatically. For others, each new sensation requires careful processing.

When several sensations feel overwhelming at once, eating can become exhausting.

Understanding the Brain

Our brains are designed to notice change.

If a food always feels exactly the same, the brain begins to predict what will happen next.

Prediction creates a sense of safety.

When a food changes unexpectedly, the brain pays attention.

Perhaps the yoghurt contains fruit pieces today. The crisps feel softer than usual. The banana is riper. The bread has a different texture.

For many people these differences are barely noticeable.

For someone with heightened sensory awareness, they can completely change the eating experience.

This is one reason why predictability is often so important.

Why Texture Matters

Texture is one of the most powerful influences on food acceptance.

People often assume that if someone likes the taste of a food, they should be able to eat it in any form.

In reality, texture frequently has a much greater influence than flavour.

For example, someone may enjoy:

- Crispy roast potatoes but not mashed potato.
- Raw vegetables but not cooked vegetables.
- Smooth yoghurt but not yoghurt with fruit pieces.
- Toast but not soft bread.
- Crispy bacon but not fatty bacon.

These preferences are not irrational. Each food provides a completely different sensory experience.

The brain responds to those differences long before nutrition becomes the priority.

The Challenge of Mixed Textures

Foods that contain multiple textures can feel particularly difficult.

Imagine taking one bite and experiencing:

- Something crunchy.
- Something soft.
- Something slippery.
- A burst of liquid.
- A change in temperature.

All at the same time.

For many people this feels interesting. For others it feels overwhelming.

Common examples include:

- Stews.
- Casseroles.
- Fruit yoghurts.
- Chunky soups.
- Stir-fries.
- Pies with mixed fillings.

This is one reason some people prefer foods where each item remains separate on the plate.

It allows the brain to predict what each bite will feel like.

Taste Is More Than Sweet or Salty

Taste is often described using five basic categories:

- Sweet.
- Salty.
- Sour.
- Bitter.
- Umami, or savoury.

However, taste is influenced by much more than our taste buds.

Our sense of smell contributes significantly to flavour. Temperature changes taste. Texture changes taste. Even colour can influence what our brain expects a food to taste like.

When sensory processing differs, these experiences may feel stronger or less predictable.

This helps explain why two people can eat exactly the same meal and have completely different sensory experiences.

Why Safe Foods Matter

One of the most misunderstood concepts in sensory eating is the idea of a safe food.

Safe foods are not simply favourite foods.
They are foods that feel predictable.

The person knows:

- How they will taste.
- How they will smell.
- How they will feel.
- What texture to expect.
- How their body is likely to respond.

That predictability reduces anxiety.

For many people with sensory processing differences or ARFID, safe foods create stability during times of stress.

They allow the nervous system to relax enough for eating to feel manageable.

Safe foods are therefore not a problem to eliminate. They are often the foundation from which confidence can gradually grow.

Why Favourite Foods Suddenly Become Wrong

Parents are often puzzled when a child suddenly refuses a food they have happily eaten for months.

It can feel confusing and frustrating.

Yet there are many possible explanations.

The food may have:

- Changed recipe.
- Been cooked differently.
- Looked different.
- Smelled different.
- Felt different in the mouth.
- Been associated with an unpleasant experience.
- Become unpredictable.

Even tiny changes can matter.

A different brand of pasta. A slightly riper piece of fruit. A yoghurt served colder than usual.

To someone else these differences may seem insignificant.

To a sensory-sensitive nervous system, they can completely alter whether a food feels safe.

Everyday Examples

Think about these familiar situations:

A child who insists their sandwiches must be cut into triangles.

An adult who always buys the same brand of cereal.

Someone who checks every crisp before eating it.

A teenager who refuses pasta unless it is a particular shape.

A person who eats foods one at a time rather than mixing them together.

These behaviours are often viewed as rigid or unusual.

More often than not, they are attempts to create predictability in an experience that otherwise feels uncertain.

When we understand that, our response becomes far more compassionate.

Research Snapshot

Research into autism, sensory processing and ARFID consistently highlights the importance of texture and predictability in food acceptance. Studies suggest that sensory characteristics, including texture, consistency, smell and appearance, often influence eating behaviour more strongly than nutritional knowledge or motivation.

This growing evidence reminds us that successful eating is not simply about encouraging someone to “try harder.” It is about understanding how their nervous system experiences food and working collaboratively to build confidence over time.

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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.