

PART 2 OF 2

SENSORY PROCESSING, NUTRITION AND THE BRAIN

SUPPORTING HEALTH WITHOUT CREATING FEAR AROUND FOOD

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There Is No Such Thing as a Perfect Diet

One of the biggest misconceptions about nutrition is that there is one perfect way to eat.

Social media often promotes extreme messages.

One week carbohydrates are the enemy.

The next week fat is being avoided.

Then another trend encourages cutting out entire food groups.

For many people these messages are confusing.

For someone already struggling with food because of sensory processing differences, they can become overwhelming and discouraging.

The truth is that nutrition is rarely about perfection.

It is about meeting your body's needs in a way that is realistic, sustainable and respectful of your individual circumstances.

A meal that feels safe, nourishing and achievable is often far more valuable than chasing an ideal that creates anxiety and shame.

Working With Safe Foods Instead of Against Them

Safe foods are often criticised because they may appear limited or repetitive.

However, from a therapeutic perspective, safe foods provide something incredibly important.

They provide consistency.

Consistency allows the nervous system to relax.

Once someone feels safe, there is often far more opportunity to explore gentle changes than when they are constantly being pushed beyond their comfort zone.

For example:

If someone feels comfortable eating one particular type of yoghurt, perhaps we begin by exploring different flavours before introducing different textures.

If someone reliably eats toast, we might gradually experiment with different toppings rather than removing the toast altogether.

Building from success is far more effective than beginning with fear.

Nutrition Is About Addition, Not Punishment

Many people approach healthy eating by asking:

"What should I stop eating?"

A more compassionate question is:

"What could I gently add?"

Could we add:

An extra glass of water?

Another source of protein?

A piece of fruit that already feels safe?

Seeds sprinkled onto a familiar meal?

A yoghurt alongside breakfast?

Thinking about addition rather than restriction reduces pressure and helps people build confidence over time.

Small nutritional improvements, repeated consistently, often have a greater long-term impact than dramatic short-lived changes.

Supporting Children Without Creating Food Anxiety

Parents often carry enormous pressure when their child has a limited diet.

Many worry they are doing something wrong.

In reality, supporting a child with sensory eating differences requires patience, flexibility and understanding.

Children benefit from environments where:

Mealtimes feel calm.

Pressure is reduced.

Safe foods are respected.

Curiosity is encouraged.

New foods are introduced gently.

Eating remains a positive experience.

Children learn far more from feeling emotionally safe than from feeling forced.

Supporting confidence around food often lays stronger foundations than focusing solely on increasing food variety.

Supporting Teenagers and Adults

Eating challenges do not disappear when someone reaches adulthood.

Many adults continue to experience:

Shame about eating in public.

Anxiety in restaurants.

Limited food choices.

Difficulty recognising hunger.

Concerns about being judged.

Unfortunately, adults often receive less understanding than children.

People assume they should simply "grow out of it."

Yet sensory processing differences do not disappear because someone gets older.

Adults deserve the same compassion, flexibility and support as children.

In My Therapy Room

One of the most rewarding moments in therapy is when someone realises they no longer have to fight with food.

I've worked with adults who spent decades believing they had failed because they couldn't eat like everyone else.

Some had tried countless diets.

Others had forced themselves to eat foods that caused overwhelming distress.

Many carried years of guilt.

As we explored sensory processing, interoception and ARFID, something began to change.

Instead of asking, "How do I force myself to eat differently?" they began asking:

"How do I nourish myself while respecting my nervous system?"

That change in perspective often marks the beginning of a much healthier relationship with food.

Not because their diet changes overnight.

But because their relationship with themselves does.

Maggie's Reflection

Health is not measured by how closely your plate matches someone else's.

It is measured by whether you are supporting your body with kindness, consistency and compassion.

Every person starts from a different place.

Every nervous system has different needs.

There is no prize for making eating harder than it needs to be.

Sometimes the healthiest thing we can do is stop criticising ourselves for where we are and begin appreciating the progress we are already making.

Practical Strategies

Supporting nutrition while respecting sensory processing differences may include:

Building meals around safe foods.

Adding nutrients gradually rather than replacing familiar foods.

Eating regularly instead of waiting until hunger becomes overwhelming.

Keeping nutritious, safe snacks easily available.

Drinking regularly throughout the day, especially if thirst cues are reduced.

Planning meals during times of lower stress where possible.

Seeking support from professionals with experience of autism, ADHD or ARFID when needed.

Celebrating progress rather than perfection.

Remember, healthy eating is not about following rigid rules.

It is about creating a sustainable relationship with food that supports both physical and emotional wellbeing.

Myth vs Reality

Myth

"Healthy eating means eating everything."

Reality

A healthy relationship with food is about meeting nutritional needs in a way that is safe, realistic and sustainable. For people with sensory processing differences or ARFID, this may involve working with safe foods first and gradually expanding variety over time. Compassion is far more effective than pressure.

Research Snapshot

Current research supports personalised nutritional approaches for neurodivergent individuals, recognising that sensory processing, interoception and emotional wellbeing all influence eating behaviour.

Evidence suggests that collaborative interventions focusing on nutritional adequacy, reduced anxiety and sustainable habit-building are more successful than approaches based solely on increasing food variety or applying pressure.

This reflects a growing shift towards understanding the whole person rather than simply focusing on what appears on the plate.

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to reflect:

How do I currently define "healthy eating"?

Are my beliefs about food based on compassion or criticism?

Which foods help me feel nourished and safe?

What is one small nutritional change that feels realistic this week?

How might I speak more kindly to myself about my eating?

These questions are not about finding perfect answers.

They are about developing greater understanding of yourself and your relationship with food.

Key Takeaways

Nutrition should support wellbeing, not create fear.

Safe foods are valuable foundations, not failures.

The brain requires consistent nourishment to function well.

Sensory processing differences influence food choices in meaningful ways.

Small, sustainable improvements are more effective than dramatic restrictions.

Compassion supports lasting change far better than shame.

Health looks different for every individual.

Before You Go...

If there is one message I hope you carry forward from this article, it is this:

Your worth is not measured by your diet.

There is no perfect plate.

There is no perfect eater.

There are simply people doing their best with the nervous systems they have.

When we stop judging ourselves for what feels difficult and begin understanding why it feels difficult, everything changes.

Instead of chasing impossible standards, we begin building realistic habits.

Instead of fearing food, we begin creating safety.

Instead of striving for perfection, we move towards nourishment.

As both a psychotherapist and someone with lived experience of autism, ADHD and ARFID, I have seen time and time again that lasting change begins with understanding - not pressure.

The goal has never been to create perfect eaters.

The goal is to help people build a relationship with food that supports both their physical health and their emotional wellbeing.

Because when we nourish the body with compassion, we nourish the mind as well.

A gentle reminder

This resource offers general information and compassionate reflection. It is not a substitute for individual medical, nutritional or therapeutic advice. If eating, hydration or physical health is becoming unsafe, please seek support from an appropriately qualified professional.

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