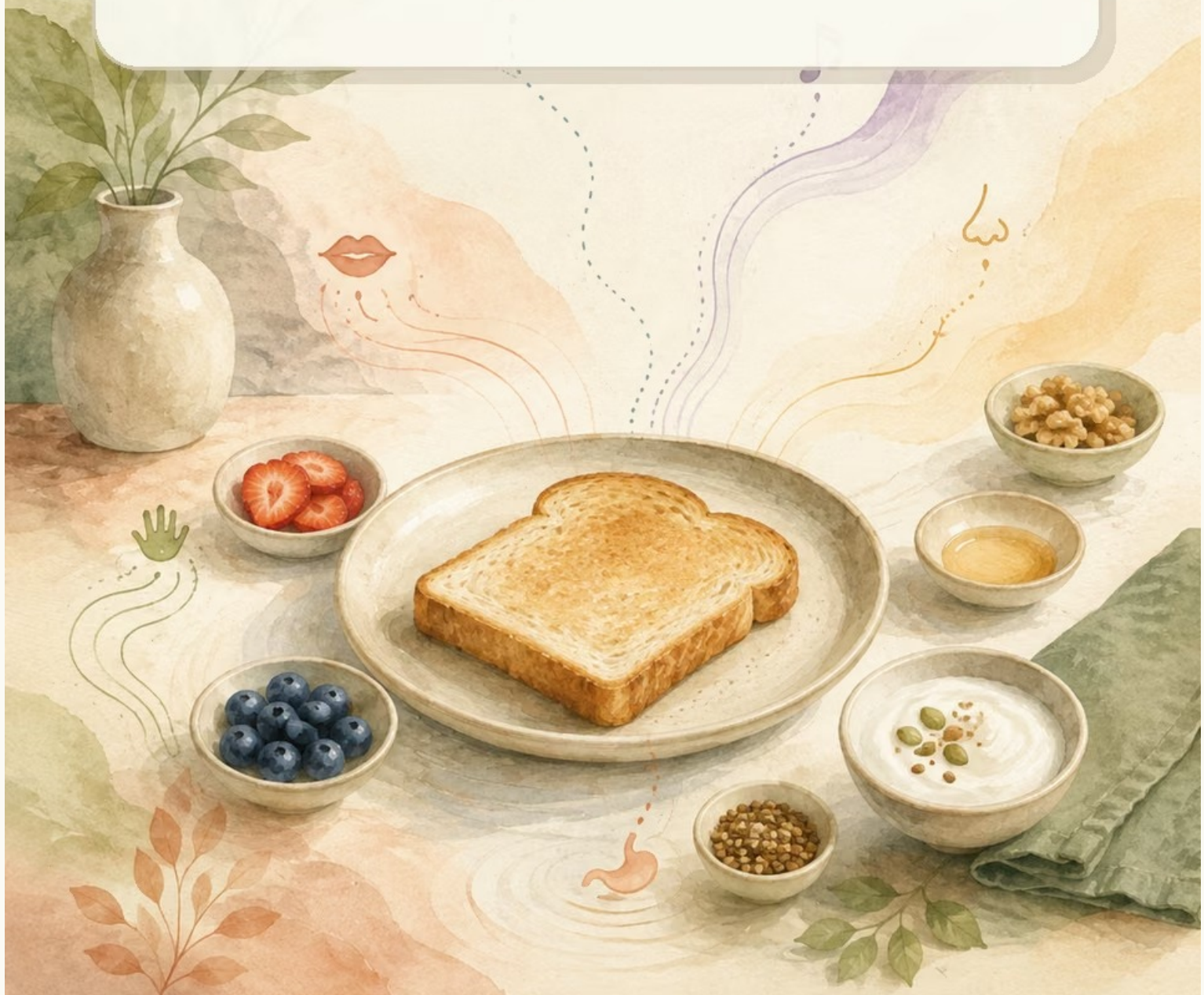


PART 1 OF 2

ADD TO THE PLATE, DON'T TAKE IT AWAY

BUILDING NUTRITION WITHOUT INCREASING FEAR

BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



By Maggie Learoyd Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Introduction

One of the most common pieces of nutrition advice people hear is:

"Stop eating that."

"Cut out carbohydrates."

"Replace it with something healthier."

"You need to eat more vegetables."

For some people these changes may feel achievable.

For others, they can feel impossible.

As a psychotherapist specialising in autism, ADHD and ARFID, I have learned that eating is rarely just about nutrition.

It is about safety.

It is about predictability.

It is about the nervous system.

For many neurodivergent people, every food carries a sensory experience. Every meal asks the brain to process texture, smell, taste, temperature, colour, sound and previous memories - all before nutrition is even considered.

When we ask someone to remove the foods that help them feel safe, we are often removing the very thing that allows them to eat at all.

Instead of beginning with restriction, I encourage a different approach.

Protect the safe food. Build the plate.

Rather than replacing familiar foods, we gently increase nutrition around them while respecting sensory differences, allergies, intolerances and medical conditions.

It is a slower approach.

But in my experience, it is one that creates lasting change.

My Thoughts

This philosophy has developed from both my personal and professional experience.

As someone who has lived with ARFID, autism and ADHD, I understand what it feels like when people look at your plate instead of listening to your experience.

Growing up, I wasn't avoiding foods because I wanted attention.

I wasn't being difficult.

My nervous system genuinely experienced food differently.

There were textures that made me gag.

Smells that overwhelmed me.

Unexpected flavours that felt unbearable.

For years I believed the answer was to force myself to become like everyone else.

It never worked.

The more pressure I felt, the harder eating became.

What eventually changed wasn't my determination.

It was my understanding.

I stopped trying to fight my nervous system and started working alongside it.

Now, in my therapy room, I see the same pattern repeatedly.

Clients often arrive believing they need to completely change the way they eat.

Instead, we begin somewhere very different.

We begin with safety.

Why "Take It Away" Often Fails

Traditional nutrition advice often focuses on removing foods.

Less sugar.

Less fat.

Less processed food.

Less bread.

Less carbohydrates.

While these recommendations may be appropriate for some people, they can unintentionally create enormous anxiety for someone whose diet is already limited by sensory processing differences.

Imagine that you have only ten foods that genuinely feel safe.

Now imagine someone tells you that four of them are unhealthy and should be removed.

Instead of feeling motivated, many people feel frightened.

Their already limited food choices become even smaller.

This can increase stress, reduce nutritional intake and make eating feel even more overwhelming.

When the nervous system feels threatened, curiosity disappears.

Survival takes over.

Food Is More Than Nutrition

When most people think about food, they think about calories, protein, vitamins and minerals.

The brain thinks about something else first.

It asks:

"Is this safe?"

Before we notice nutrition, our nervous system has already assessed:

The smell.

The colour.

The temperature.

The texture.

Whether it looks familiar.

Whether it behaved the same way last time.

Whether we have a positive or negative memory associated with it.

For someone with sensory processing differences, these questions happen automatically.

The response is not a choice.

It is a neurological process.

This is why eating cannot simply be explained through willpower.

Understanding the Brain

The brain is constantly making predictions.

Every familiar food becomes a stored memory.

It remembers how crunchy it was.

How smooth it felt.

Whether it was warm or cold.

Whether it caused discomfort.

Whether it felt safe.

When a familiar meal appears, the brain already knows what to expect.

That predictability reduces cognitive effort.

It allows the nervous system to remain relatively calm.

An unfamiliar food is very different.

The brain has no previous blueprint.

It must process multiple new sensory experiences simultaneously.

For some people, this creates curiosity.

For others, particularly those with autism, ADHD or ARFID, it can create sensory overload before the first bite has even been taken.

Understanding this changes the question from:

"Why won't they try it?"

to

"What is their nervous system experiencing right now?"

That small shift creates enormous compassion.

Safe Foods Are Foundations, Not Failures

I often hear people apologise for eating the same meals repeatedly.

They describe themselves as boring.

Fussy.

Childish.

Unhealthy.

I see something very different.

I see a nervous system that has found stability.

Safe foods provide predictability.

They reduce uncertainty.

They allow someone to nourish themselves without becoming overwhelmed.

That doesn't mean nutrition cannot improve.

It simply means we build from that foundation rather than demolishing it.

A strong house is never built by removing its foundations.

It is strengthened by building carefully on top of them.

The same is true of nutrition.

Add Before You Replace

One of the core principles I teach is beautifully simple.

Add before you replace.

Instead of asking:

"What should I stop eating?"

Try asking:

"What could I gently add?"

Could we add:

An egg alongside toast?

Seeds sprinkled onto yoghurt?

Cottage cheese with crackers?

A handful of tolerated berries?

Lentils mixed into a familiar meal?

A source of healthy fat that already feels acceptable?

The familiar food remains.

Safety remains.

The nervous system stays regulated.

Yet nutrition gradually improves.

Small additions repeated consistently are often far more successful than dramatic changes that cannot be maintained.

Respecting Allergies, Intolerances and Medical Conditions

This approach is never about encouraging someone to ignore genuine medical needs.

Before expanding any diet, it is essential to understand the difference between:

Sensory preferences.

Sensory avoidance.

ARFID.

Confirmed food allergies.

Diagnosed food intolerances.

Medical conditions requiring dietary modification.

These experiences are very different.

A confirmed allergy should never be challenged.

A diagnosed intolerance deserves respect.

Someone with coeliac disease, inflammatory bowel disease or another medical condition requires advice tailored to their health needs.

Nutrition should always work within these boundaries.

Our aim is not to increase food variety at any cost.

Our aim is to support health safely.

The SPACE Framework™

Over the years I have developed a simple way of thinking about nutritional support that reflects both neuroscience and compassion.

S - Safety comes first

Respect allergies, intolerances, medical advice and the person's emotional experience of eating.

P - Protect safe foods

Safe foods are not the enemy. They provide stability and help regulate the nervous system.

A - Add, don't replace

Increase nutrition gradually by building around familiar foods instead of removing them.

C - Curiosity over criticism

Replace judgement with understanding. Ask what feels difficult rather than assuming someone is being difficult.

E - Expand at their pace

Progress should be measured by confidence, not by the number of foods someone can tolerate.

Research Snapshot

Research into autism, ADHD, ARFID and sensory processing increasingly supports low-pressure, person-centred approaches to expanding diets. Studies suggest that gradual exposure, collaborative goal-setting and respect for sensory differences are associated with greater long-term success than coercive or highly restrictive approaches.

Current evidence also highlights the importance of distinguishing between sensory-based food avoidance, medically confirmed allergies and diagnosed intolerances. Treating these experiences as though they are the same can lead to unnecessary distress or, in some cases, place someone's physical health at risk.

The growing consensus is clear: successful nutritional support is not about forcing change - it is about creating enough safety for change to become possible.

If there is one idea I hope you take from this first part, it is this:

We don't build confidence by taking safety away.

We build confidence by protecting what already feels safe and gently expanding from there.

That is how we support both the brain and the body.

That is how we build a healthier relationship with food.

Continued in Part 2, where we'll explore practical ways to build nutritional density without increasing sensory overload, real-life examples of adding to the plate, supporting children and adults, "In My Therapy Room", practical strategies and how small changes can create lifelong confidence around food.

Maggie Learoyd Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist Founder of Space to Breathe Therapy

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.

Maggie Learoyd
Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist
Founder of Space to Breathe Therapy