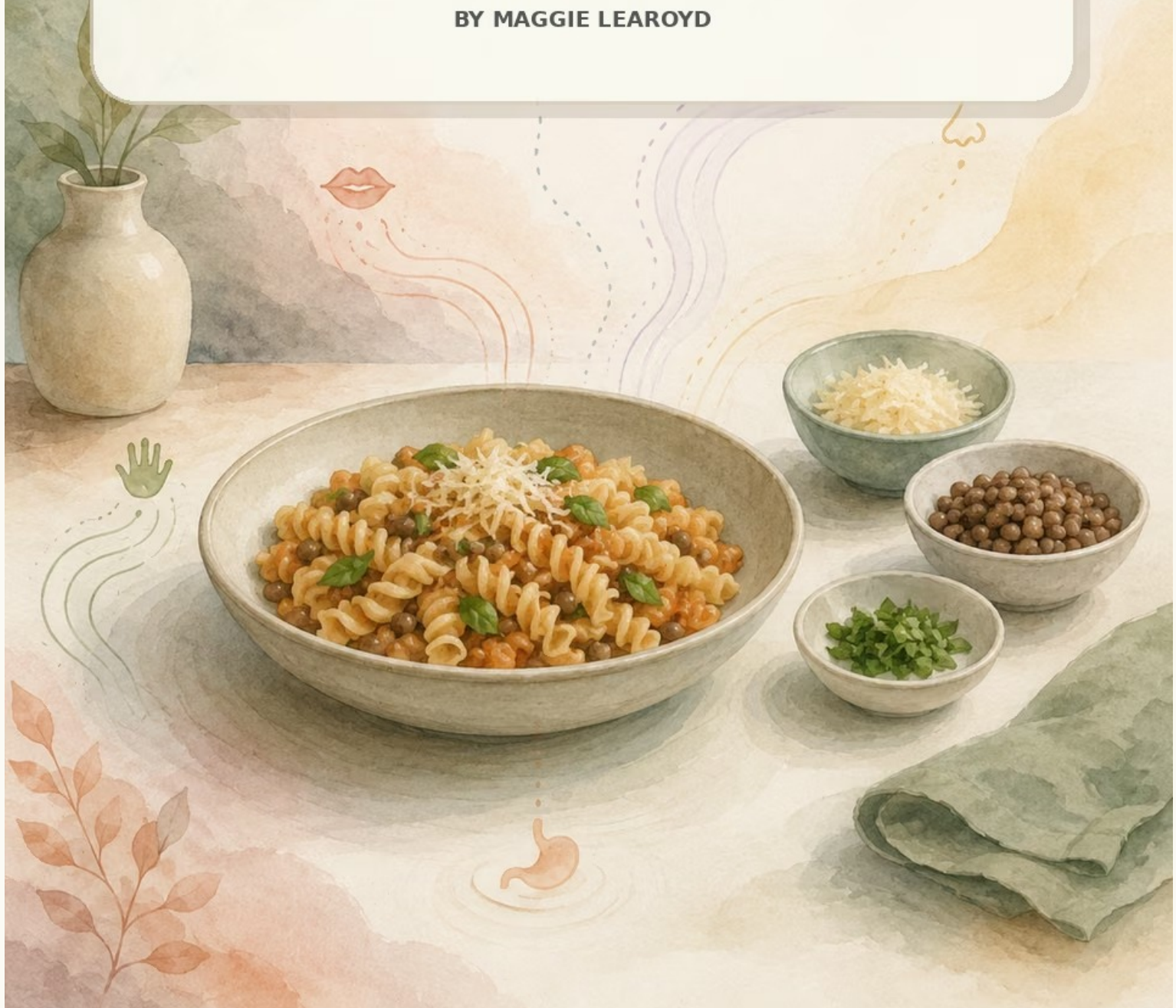


PART 2 OF 2

ADD TO THE PLATE, DON'T TAKE IT AWAY

GENTLE ADDITIONS · SAFETY · NOURISHMENT

BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



By Maggie Learoyd Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Building Nutrition Without Increasing Sensory Overload

Once we understand that safe foods are the foundation, the next step is not to remove them.

It is to build around them.

This is where many people begin to feel hopeful.

Improving nutrition does not have to mean changing everything overnight.

It can mean making one small addition that your nervous system is able to tolerate.

For someone with sensory processing differences, one new sensory experience may be enough for that day.

Adding three or four changes at once may be far too much.

Imagine trying to listen to four conversations at the same time while bright lights are flashing and someone keeps changing the music.

That is what introducing too many new sensory experiences can feel like for some people.

Instead, we keep the nervous system regulated by introducing one small, manageable change at a time.

Progress is not measured by how quickly someone expands their diet.

Progress is measured by how safe they continue to feel while doing it.

Building Nutritional Density

Nutritional density simply means increasing the amount of beneficial nutrients in foods someone already enjoys.

It is not about making meals look completely different.

Sometimes the smallest changes have the biggest impact.

For example:

Instead of replacing toast...

Could we add an egg alongside it?

Instead of replacing yoghurt...

Could we add a teaspoon of chia seeds or ground flaxseed if they are tolerated?

Instead of removing pasta...

Could we add grated cheese, lentils, minced meat or a blended sauce that matches the existing texture?

Instead of changing a favourite breakfast...

Could we simply increase the protein alongside it?

These small additions allow nutrition to grow while keeping familiarity intact.

The brain continues to recognise the meal.

The nervous system remains calmer.

Confidence slowly increases.

Every New Food Is Also a New Sensory Experience

When someone says,

"Just try one bite."

they often think they are asking for something very small.

From a sensory perspective, that one bite may involve:

A new smell.

A new texture.

A different temperature.

A different sound when chewing.

A different appearance.

A different aftertaste.

Different expectations.

Uncertainty about how the body might respond.

That is a tremendous amount of information for the brain to process.

This is why expanding a palate is rarely about bravery.

It is about reducing sensory demand enough for curiosity to replace fear.

Understanding the Brain

The brain learns through repetition.

When a new experience is paired with safety, predictability and positive emotions, the brain is more likely to accept it over time.

When a new experience is paired with anxiety, pressure or embarrassment, the brain stores it as something to avoid.

This is one reason forcing children - or adults - to eat unfamiliar foods often has the opposite effect.

The goal is not simply exposure.

The goal is positive exposure.

Experiences where the nervous system remains regulated are far more likely to build confidence than experiences that trigger overwhelm.

Supporting Children

Children learn about food long before they understand nutrition.

They learn from the emotional atmosphere around meals.

When mealtimes become battles, children often begin associating food with stress rather than connection.

Parents understandably worry when a child has a limited diet.

The instinct is often to encourage, persuade or negotiate.

While this comes from love, pressure can unintentionally increase anxiety.

Instead, try creating opportunities for positive experiences.

Invite your child to:

Help choose foods in the supermarket.

Wash vegetables.

Stir ingredients.

Smell herbs and spices.

Touch foods without pressure to eat them.

Watch others enjoy food without expectation.

Every positive interaction counts.

Remember, success is not always measured by eating.

Sometimes success is simply being willing to explore.

Supporting Teenagers and Adults

Eating difficulties do not disappear when childhood ends.

Many adults have spent years masking their challenges.

Some avoid work lunches.

Others decline invitations to restaurants.

Many worry about being judged for eating the same foods repeatedly.

By adulthood, the emotional burden is often heavier than the eating difficulty itself.

This is why compassion matters.

Adults deserve support just as much as children.

The aim is never to create the "perfect diet."

The aim is to help someone meet their nutritional needs in a way that feels achievable, respectful and emotionally safe.

In My Therapy Room

One of the first things I say to clients is:

"We're not going to take away the foods that help you feel safe."

You can often see the relief on their faces.

Many arrive expecting another lecture about everything they should stop eating.

Instead, we begin by understanding what is already working.

We identify safe foods.

We explore sensory experiences.

We discuss allergies, intolerances and medical conditions.

Then we ask one very simple question:

"What is the smallest change your nervous system feels ready for?"

For one client, that meant adding a spoonful of Greek yoghurt alongside a familiar breakfast.

For another, it meant sprinkling hemp seeds onto food they already enjoyed.

For someone else, it was simply allowing a new food to sit on the table without any expectation of tasting it.

These changes may appear tiny.

They are not.

Each positive experience tells the brain:

"You are safe."

Over weeks and months, these moments build confidence that cannot be created through force.

Maggie's Reflection

One of the greatest lessons my own journey has taught me is that healing rarely comes from pushing harder.

It comes from understanding better.

When we stop trying to fight our nervous system and begin working with it, progress feels different.

Gentler.

Kinder.

More sustainable.

Every meal does not have to be perfect.

Every day does not have to be a success.

Some days, eating your safe foods is enough.

Other days, you may feel ready to add something new.

Both are part of the journey.

Progress isn't measured by how much your plate changes.

It's measured by how much fear begins to disappear.

Practical Strategies

If you would like to improve nutrition while respecting sensory needs, consider these gentle principles:

Protect foods that already feel safe.

Introduce one sensory change at a time.

Add nutrients before removing familiar foods.

Always respect confirmed allergies, intolerances and medical advice.

Build meals around success rather than perfection.

Focus on nutritional adequacy rather than an idealised diet.

Celebrate curiosity, even if a new food is not eaten.

Remember that repeated positive experiences build confidence.

Small steps, repeated consistently, create lasting change.

Myth vs Reality

Myth

"Healthy eating means replacing all of your favourite foods."

Reality

Healthy eating is about meeting your nutritional needs in a way that supports both your physical health and your nervous system. For many people with sensory processing differences or ARFID, nutrition improves most successfully when new foods are added alongside familiar ones rather than replacing them.

Research Snapshot

Research into sensory processing, autism and ARFID continues to demonstrate that low-pressure, person-centred approaches lead to better long-term outcomes than highly restrictive or coercive methods.

Studies also suggest that reducing anxiety around food improves willingness to explore new foods over time. Nutritional progress is most sustainable when emotional safety, sensory differences and individual medical needs are all considered together.

This growing evidence reflects an important shift in healthcare - from asking, "How do we make someone eat differently?" to asking, "How do we help someone feel safe enough to explore?"

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to reflect on your own relationship with food.

Which foods help me feel safe and regulated?

Do I criticise myself for relying on familiar foods?

Could I add one small source of nutrition without taking anything away?

Am I respecting my own allergies, intolerances and sensory experiences?

What would progress look like if I measured confidence instead of perfection?

There are no right or wrong answers.

These questions are simply an invitation to understand yourself with greater compassion.

Key Takeaways

Safe foods are the starting point, not the problem.

Building nutrition is often more successful than replacing familiar foods.

Every new food is also a new sensory experience.

Allergies, intolerances and medical conditions should always be respected.

The nervous system learns through positive, low-pressure experiences.

Confidence grows through safety, not force.

Sustainable change happens one small step at a time.

Before You Go...

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

Healthy eating should never come at the cost of feeling unsafe.

Your nervous system is not trying to make life difficult.

It is trying to protect you.

When we understand that, we stop asking people to battle against themselves and start helping them build from where they are.

As both a psychotherapist and someone with lived experience of autism, ADHD and ARFID, I have seen the difference this approach can make.

I've watched children become curious instead of fearful.

I've seen adults let go of decades of shame because someone finally understood why eating felt so difficult.

And I've learned that lasting change doesn't begin with removing food from someone's plate.

It begins with protecting what already feels safe and gently building around it.

Because every meal is more than nutrition.

It is an opportunity to tell the nervous system:

"You are safe."

And when the brain begins to believe that, confidence naturally starts to grow.

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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