

PART 1 OF 2

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF SENSORY EATING DIFFICULTIES

SHAME · ANXIETY · TRAUMA · MENTAL HEALTH

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Introduction

For many people, eating is seen as one of the simplest parts of everyday life.

We gather around tables with family, celebrate birthdays with cake, meet friends for lunch and enjoy meals without giving them much thought.

For others, every meal carries an emotional weight that is invisible to everyone else.

Imagine spending years being told you are "too fussy."

Imagine feeling embarrassed every time someone comments on your food.

Imagine avoiding social events because you know people will ask why you are eating something different.

Imagine forcing yourself to swallow food while every part of your nervous system is telling you to stop.

This is the reality for many people living with sensory processing differences, autism, ADHD or Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID).

The greatest challenge is often not the food itself.

It is the emotional burden that develops around it.

Over time, repeated experiences of misunderstanding, criticism and pressure can shape the way someone thinks about themselves.

They may begin to believe they are difficult.

Broken.

Immature.

A burden.

Yet none of these beliefs reflect the truth.

They are the result of living in a world that often misunderstands neurological differences.

My Thoughts

When I look back at my own childhood, I don't remember simply struggling with food.

I remember the feelings that came with it.

Feeling different.

Feeling embarrassed.

Feeling as though everyone else had received instructions for eating that I had somehow missed.

I became very good at hiding my anxiety.

I learned to smile when I felt uncomfortable.

I learned to avoid situations where food might become the focus.

Most importantly, I learned to criticise myself long before anyone else had the chance.

That inner critic stayed with me for many years.

It wasn't until I understood autism, ADHD, ARFID and sensory processing that I realised those feelings hadn't developed because there was something wrong with me.

They had developed because I had spent years trying to fit into environments that didn't understand my nervous system.

Now, as a psychotherapist, I hear those same feelings reflected in the stories my clients share.

Different ages.

Different backgrounds.

The same shame.

The same self-doubt.

The same question:

"Why can't I just be normal?"

My answer is always the same.

You were never meant to become someone else.

You were meant to understand yourself.

When Eating Becomes an Emotional Experience

Every experience we have with food teaches the brain something.

Positive experiences teach us that eating is enjoyable, safe and connected with comfort.

Negative experiences can teach the brain something very different.

If someone repeatedly experiences:

Criticism.

Pressure.

Embarrassment.

Gagging.

Anxiety.

Punishment.

Feeling misunderstood.

The brain begins associating eating with emotional distress rather than nourishment.

Eventually, the emotional response may become stronger than the physical experience itself.

Even thinking about eating can trigger anxiety before food is present.

Understanding the Brain

Our brains are designed to learn from experience.

This process is essential for survival.

If something repeatedly causes distress, the brain remembers.

It predicts that the same situation may happen again.

This is why emotional reactions around food can become so powerful.

The brain is not trying to make life difficult.

It is trying to protect us.

Unfortunately, when that protective system becomes linked with everyday eating, it can create enormous challenges.

Understanding this helps us respond with compassion instead of frustration.

The Weight of Shame

Shame is one of the most painful emotions we experience.

Unlike guilt, which says:

"I did something wrong."

Shame says:

"There is something wrong with me."

Many people with sensory eating differences grow up hearing messages such as:

"Stop making a fuss."

"You're embarrassing me."

"You're too old for this."

"Just eat it."

"Everyone else manages."

Although these comments may seem small, repeated over months or years they become internal beliefs.

Eventually, people begin saying those things to themselves.

The result is often a lifetime of unnecessary self-criticism.

Anxiety Around Mealtimes

Once anxiety becomes linked with eating, mealtimes can feel unpredictable and exhausting.

People may begin worrying long before food is served.

Questions race through their minds.

"Will there be something I can eat?"

"Will someone comment on my food?"

"Will I be expected to try something new?"

"What if I gag?"

"What if people stare?"

The body responds as though preparing for a threat.

Heart rate increases.

Muscles tense.

Digestion slows.

Appetite disappears.

From the outside, it may appear that someone simply doesn't want to eat.

Inside, their nervous system is preparing to protect them.

The Social Cost of Eating Difficulties

Food is woven into almost every social occasion.

Birthdays.

Christmas.

Weddings.

Work events.

Family gatherings.

School trips.

Date nights.

Friendships.

When eating becomes difficult, many people begin avoiding these situations altogether.

Not because they don't enjoy spending time with others.

But because the emotional effort of explaining, masking or defending their food choices becomes too much.

Loneliness can gradually replace connection.

This is one of the hidden impacts of sensory eating difficulties that deserves far more attention.

Trauma and Food

Not everyone with sensory eating differences has experienced trauma.

However, repeated negative experiences around food can themselves become traumatic.

Imagine being forced to sit at a table until you finish a meal.

Being laughed at for gagging.

Being punished for refusing certain foods.

Being told you are selfish or ungrateful.

These experiences teach the nervous system that mealtimes are unsafe.

The emotional memories can remain long after childhood has ended.

Healing often begins not with changing the food, but by changing the emotional experience surrounding it.

Everyday Examples

Consider these situations:

An adult who never attends work lunches because they fear being judged.

A teenager who skips school meals and waits until they get home to eat.

A child who cries when asked to sit at the dinner table.

Someone who apologises every time they explain their food choices.

These behaviours are often misunderstood.

In reality, they are frequently attempts to protect themselves from emotional distress.

Research Snapshot

Research increasingly recognises that sensory eating differences affect emotional wellbeing as well as nutrition. Studies involving autistic individuals and people with ARFID show higher levels of anxiety, social isolation and experiences of shame related to eating.

These findings reinforce the importance of addressing emotional safety alongside nutritional support, recognising that both are essential for long-term wellbeing.

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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