

PART 2 OF 2

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF SENSORY EATING DIFFICULTIES

REBUILDING TRUST · SELF-COMPASSION · HEALING

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Rebuilding Trust With Food

One of the most important parts of healing is recognising that recovery is not simply about eating more foods.

It is about rebuilding trust.

Trust in your body.

Trust in your nervous system.

Trust that mealtimes no longer have to be associated with fear, criticism or shame.

For many people, this is the first time they have considered that eating is an emotional experience as well as a physical one.

If every meal has been accompanied by anxiety, pressure or judgement, your brain has learned to expect those feelings.

Healing begins by creating new experiences that gently teach the nervous system something different.

That eating can feel calm.

That it can feel safe.

That it can even become enjoyable.

These changes rarely happen overnight, but they are possible.

The Power of Self-Compassion

Many people I meet speak to themselves in ways they would never speak to another person.

They describe themselves as:

Difficult.

Pathetic.

Childish.

Broken.

A burden.

These words often reflect years of misunderstanding rather than reality.

Self-compassion is not about pretending everything is easy.

It is about responding to yourself with the same kindness you would offer someone you love.

Imagine a child gagging because of a food texture.

Would you call them lazy?

Would you accuse them of attention seeking?

Or would you comfort them and try to understand what happened?

Adults deserve that same compassion.

Healing often begins when we stop fighting ourselves and start listening.

Understanding Emotional Triggers

Sometimes the food itself is not the biggest challenge.

The trigger may be:

A particular smell linked to an unpleasant memory.

Sitting at a family table where conflict often occurred.

A comment someone made years ago.

Being expected to finish everything on the plate.

Feeling watched while eating.

Our brains store emotional memories remarkably well.

When similar situations arise, the nervous system can react automatically before we have consciously recognised what is happening.

Understanding these triggers is not about dwelling on the past.

It is about recognising the experiences that continue to influence the present.

Awareness creates opportunities for change.

Healing Is Not Linear

People often expect recovery to follow a straight line.

In reality, progress usually looks much more like a winding path.

There will be days when eating feels easier.

There may also be days when familiar foods suddenly feel difficult again.

Stress.

Illness.

Fatigue.

Changes in routine.

Life events.

All of these can influence how safe food feels.

Experiencing setbacks does not mean you have failed.

It simply means your nervous system is responding to what is happening around you.

Healing is about learning to respond with flexibility rather than self-criticism.

Supporting Someone Without Increasing Shame

If someone you care about struggles with food, your response can have a lasting impact.

Supportive approaches include:

Listening without judgement.

Believing their sensory experiences.

Respecting safe foods.

Avoiding pressure or criticism.

Celebrating small successes.

Asking how you can help rather than assuming.

Simple changes in language can make an enormous difference.

Instead of saying:

"Why won't you eat it?"

Try asking:

"Can you help me understand what feels difficult about this food?"

That one question communicates curiosity, respect and compassion.

In My Therapy Room

One of the greatest privileges of my work is witnessing the moment someone realises they are not alone.

Clients often tell me that they have spent years hiding their struggles because they feared being judged.

Some have never spoken openly about the anxiety they experience around food.

Others have spent decades believing they simply lacked willpower.

As we explore their experiences together, something remarkable begins to happen.

The shame starts to soften.

Not because every challenge disappears.

But because they finally understand that their experiences make sense.

They stop asking, "What's wrong with me?"

Instead, they begin asking:

"What has my nervous system been trying to protect me from?"

That shift is often where healing truly begins.

Maggie's Reflection

One of the most important lessons I have learned, both personally and professionally, is that understanding changes everything.

When we replace judgement with curiosity, we create space for growth.

When we replace shame with compassion, we create space for healing.

No one deserves to feel embarrassed because eating is difficult.

Every person deserves to feel safe enough to nourish themselves in a way that works for their body and their nervous system.

Practical Strategies

If eating has become emotionally difficult, these ideas may help:

Create calm, predictable mealtimes.

Allow yourself to rely on safe foods when needed.

Introduce new foods only when you feel emotionally regulated.

Notice critical self-talk and gently challenge it.

Keep a journal of positive eating experiences rather than focusing only on difficult ones.

Seek support from professionals who understand sensory processing and ARFID.

Remember that emotional healing is just as important as nutritional progress.

Supporting yourself with kindness is not giving up.

It is creating the conditions in which meaningful change becomes possible.

Myth vs Reality

Myth

"They just need to be more determined."

Reality

Determination alone cannot override a nervous system that feels threatened. Sensory eating difficulties are influenced by neurological processing, emotional experiences and learned patterns of safety. Compassionate, person-centred support is far more effective than criticism or pressure.

Research Snapshot

Research consistently demonstrates that shame and anxiety can significantly influence eating behaviour. Studies suggest that supportive relationships, psychological safety and person-centred interventions improve long-term outcomes for people with ARFID and sensory eating differences.

Evidence also highlights the importance of addressing emotional wellbeing alongside nutritional support, recognising that both are essential parts of recovery.

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to reflect:

What messages did I receive about food growing up?

Do I criticise myself when eating feels difficult?

What helps me feel emotionally safe during meals?

How might I show myself more compassion this week?

If I support someone else, how can I replace judgement with curiosity?

These questions are not about finding fault.

They are about creating greater understanding.

Key Takeaways

Sensory eating difficulties affect emotional wellbeing as well as nutrition.

Shame often develops through repeated misunderstanding and criticism.

Anxiety around food is a genuine nervous system response.

Healing begins with safety, compassion and understanding.

Recovery is rarely linear.

Small, positive experiences build confidence over time.

Self-compassion is one of the most powerful tools in recovery.

Before You Go...

If you've recognised yourself in this article, I hope you leave with one simple truth:

You are not difficult.

You are not broken.

You are not failing.

You have been navigating a world that often expects everyone to experience food in the same way.

But people are wonderfully different.

Our brains are different.

Our nervous systems are different.

Our experiences are different.

Understanding those differences is not about making excuses.

It is about creating the right support.

As both a psychotherapist and someone with lived experience of autism, ADHD and ARFID, I know how heavy shame can become when carried for years.

I also know how powerful understanding can be.

When we begin to see ourselves through the lens of compassion instead of criticism, something shifts.

The goal is no longer to become someone else.

The goal is to become kinder to the person you already are.

And sometimes, that is where the deepest healing begins.

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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