

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF SENSORY EATING DIFFICULTIES

Rebuilding Trust · Reducing Shame · Healing

PART 2 OF 2

Understanding the emotional experiences surrounding sensory eating difficulties and creating conditions for safer, kinder recovery.

By Maggie Learoyd MNCPS

Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Space to Breathe Therapy

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, your nervous system and the possibility 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, the brain learns to expect those feelings.

Healing begins by creating new experiences that gently teach the nervous system something different: eating can feel calm, safe and sometimes enjoyable. These changes rarely happen overnight, but they are possible.

The power of self-kindness

Many people I meet speak to themselves in ways they would never speak to another person. They may call themselves difficult, pathetic, childish, broken or a burden. These words often reflect years of misunderstanding rather than reality.

Self-kindness is not pretending everything is easy. It means responding to yourself with the understanding you would offer someone you love.

Imagine a child gagging because of a food texture. Would you call them lazy or attention-seeking? Or would you comfort them and try to understand what happened? Adults deserve that same understanding.

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

How trust grows

Trust is built through repeated experiences of choice, predictability and being believed. A familiar food served without comment, permission to stop, or being able to choose where to sit can all tell the nervous system that eating is becoming safer.

A first step

Notice the words you use after a difficult eating experience. Ask whether they describe the situation fairly or repeat an old judgement. Replace blame with a factual sentence: "That texture felt overwhelming today" or "My nervous system needs more safety."

Then identify one thing that helped, even slightly. Recovery becomes easier to recognise when small moments of safety are noticed alongside the difficult ones.

Trust-building reflection

What felt difficult? _____	What helped? _____
What do I need next time? _____	What can stay familiar? _____

Understanding emotional triggers

Sometimes the food itself is not the biggest challenge. A trigger may be a smell linked to an unpleasant memory, sitting at a table where conflict occurred, a comment made years ago, pressure to finish everything, or feeling watched while eating.

The brain stores emotional memories remarkably well. When a similar situation arises, the nervous system may react automatically before we consciously recognise what is happening.

Understanding 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 more like a winding path. There will be days when eating feels easier and days when familiar foods suddenly feel difficult again.

Factors that may change how safe food feels include:

- stress
- illness
- fatigue
- changes in routine
- life events
- sensory overload or an unfamiliar environment

A setback does not mean you have failed. It may simply mean your nervous system is responding to what is happening around you. Healing involves flexibility rather than self-criticism.

Supporting someone without increasing shame

A supportive response can have a lasting impact. Listen without judgement, believe the person's sensory experience, respect safe foods, avoid pressure and celebrate small steps. Ask how you can help rather than assuming.

Instead of: "Why won't you eat it?"

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

That question communicates curiosity, respect and a willingness to understand.

Helpful language

- "Would you like this food kept separate?"
- "You do not have to explain everything right now."
- "What would make this meal feel a little safer?"
- "Your safe food is welcome here."

Keep questions genuine and allow the person not to answer. Safety grows when words are matched by consistent, pressure-free actions.

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 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, shame starts to soften - not because every challenge disappears, but because they finally understand that their experiences make sense.

They stop asking, "What is 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 understanding, 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 nervous system.

Practical strategies

- create calm, predictable mealtimes
- rely on safe foods when needed
- introduce new foods only when emotionally regulated
- notice critical self-talk and gently challenge it
- keep a journal of positive or neutral eating experiences
- seek support from professionals who understand sensory processing and ARFID

Supporting yourself with kindness is not giving up. It creates the conditions in which meaningful change becomes possible.

Myth versus 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. Person-centred support is more effective than criticism or pressure.

Research snapshot

Research consistently shows that shame and anxiety can influence eating behaviour. Supportive relationships, psychological safety and person-centred interventions can improve outcomes for people with ARFID and sensory eating differences. Emotional wellbeing and nutritional support are both important parts of recovery.

Reflection questions

- What messages did I receive about food while growing up?
- Do I criticise myself when eating feels difficult?
- What helps me feel emotionally safe during meals?
- How might I show myself more understanding 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 and understanding
- recovery is rarely linear
- small positive experiences build confidence over time
- self-kindness is a powerful recovery tool

A gentle weekly intention

Choose one small action that increases safety: a calmer setting, a familiar food, less conversation about eating, permission to pause, or support from someone trusted. Notice what helps without turning the experience into a test.

Before you go...

If you have recognised yourself in this guide, 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, nervous systems and 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 understanding 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.

Sometimes, that is where the deepest healing begins.

Create your safety plan

- one or two foods you can usually manage
- a drink you can keep within reach
- a calmer place or preferred way to eat
- a person who can listen without pressuring
- the signs that tell you extra support is needed

Write these down somewhere accessible. A plan made on a calmer day can reduce decisions when eating feels especially difficult.

My support contacts

Person or service _____	How they can help _____
Contact details _____	When I will reach out _____

A gentle reminder

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

Where possible, look for support that understands neurodivergence, sensory processing and ARFID, and works collaboratively without pressure or shame.

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