

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF SENSORY EATING DIFFICULTIES

Shame · Anxiety · Trauma · Mental Health

PART 1 OF 2

Understanding the invisible emotional weight that can accompany sensory eating difficulties.

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Introduction

For many people, eating appears simple, social and instinctive. For others, every meal carries an invisible emotional weight. Imagine being called “too fussy” for years, feeling embarrassed when someone comments on your food, avoiding events because you do not know what will be served, or forcing yourself to swallow while your nervous system is saying stop.

This is the reality for many people with sensory processing differences, autism, ADHD or avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID). The greatest challenge is often not the food itself, but the emotional burden surrounding it.

Repeated misunderstanding, criticism and pressure can gradually create beliefs such as: “I am difficult”, “I am broken”, “I am immature” or “I am a burden”. These beliefs can feel convincing, but they are not the truth.

My thoughts

Growing up, I did not only struggle with food. I struggled with the feelings that came with it. I felt different and embarrassed, as though everyone else had received a set of eating instructions that I had somehow missed.

I learned to hide my anxiety. I smiled when I felt uncomfortable, avoided situations where food might become the focus, and often criticised myself before anyone else had the chance. Over time, that inner critic became familiar and stayed with me for years.

The emotional story around food can become as powerful as the sensory experience itself.

A first reflection

Think about an early food memory. What happened, what did your body notice, and what message did you take away about yourself? There is no need to force an answer. Curiosity is enough.

What happened? _____	What did I need? _____
What did I believe? _____	What feels true now? _____

Understanding myself differently

Later in life, I began to understand autism, ADHD, ARFID and sensory processing. I realised those painful feelings had not come from personal failure. They had developed in environments that did not understand my nervous system.

As a psychotherapist, I hear the same shame and self-doubt from many people: “Why can’t I just be normal?” My answer is that you were never meant to become someone else. You were meant to understand yourself.

When eating becomes an emotional experience

Our experiences teach the brain what to expect. Positive experiences may connect food with safety, comfort and connection. Repeated criticism, pressure, embarrassment, gagging, anxiety, punishment or feeling misunderstood can instead connect eating with emotional distress.

Eventually, anxiety may appear before the meal begins. A smell, invitation, restaurant menu or simple question about food can trigger the expectation of difficulty.

Understanding the brain

The brain learns through repetition. When something feels frightening or overwhelming, it remembers and tries to predict when it might happen again. This is a protective process.

A person who freezes, avoids, loses their appetite or relies on familiar foods is not trying to make life difficult. Their nervous system may be trying to prevent another distressing experience.

Protective response

Avoiding, freezing, gagging, losing appetite or choosing only familiar foods.

Possible meaning

“My brain expects danger and is trying to keep me safe.”

Notice the pattern

- What happens before the anxiety begins?
- Which sensory details feel strongest: taste, smell, texture, temperature, appearance or sound?
- Does being watched, hurried or questioned increase distress?
- What helps your body feel even five per cent safer?

The aim is not to judge the response. It is to understand what the nervous system has learned.

The weight of shame

Guilt says, “I did something wrong.” Shame says, “There is something wrong with me.” That difference matters.

Repeated messages such as “Stop making a fuss”, “You’re embarrassing me”, “You’re too old for this”, “Just eat it” or “Everyone else manages” can gradually become internal beliefs. Even when nobody is speaking, the criticism may continue inside.

Shame often encourages hiding, apologising and avoiding support. It can make a person believe they must earn the right to eat in the way their body can manage.

Anxiety around mealtimes

Worry may start long before food arrives: Will there be something I can eat? Will someone comment? Will I be expected to try something new? What if I gag? What if people stare?

The body may then enter a threat response. Heart rate increases, muscles tense, digestion slows and appetite can disappear. From the outside, it may look as if the person simply does not want to eat. Inside, the nervous system is trying to protect them.

Thought “Everyone will notice.”	Body response Tension, nausea, no appetite.
Protective action Avoid, mask or leave.	Kinder interpretation “My system expects pressure.”

Replacing shame with accuracy

A kinder statement does not dismiss the difficulty. It describes it more truthfully.

Shame-based thought	More accurate response
“I am being difficult.”	“This food is genuinely overwhelming for me.”
“I should be able to cope.”	“My capacity changes with stress and sensory load.”
“I have failed again.”	“My nervous system needs safety, not punishment.”

The social cost

Food is woven through birthdays, Christmas, weddings, work events, family gatherings, school trips, date nights and friendships. When eating feels unsafe, these occasions can require explaining, masking or defending. Some people avoid them altogether, and loneliness can replace connection.

Declining an invitation may therefore be a protective decision rather than a lack of interest. Inclusion becomes more possible when safe food, choice and discretion are treated as ordinary needs.

Trauma and food

Not everyone with sensory eating difficulties has food-related trauma. However, experiences such as being forced to remain at the table, being laughed at for gagging, being punished for refusing food or being described as selfish or ungrateful can become traumatic.

The nervous system may learn that mealtimes are places of powerlessness, conflict or humiliation. Healing can begin when the emotional context changes: the person is believed, has meaningful choice and is not pressured beyond their capacity.

Everyday examples

- An adult avoids work lunches because explaining food needs feels exposing.
- A teenager skips school meals to escape comments and sensory overload.
- A child cries at the table before a new food is served.
- A person apologises repeatedly for choosing a familiar food.

These behaviours are not character flaws. They may be attempts to reduce threat, shame or overwhelm.

Making social eating safer

- share menus or plans in advance
- allow a safe food without comment
- avoid making someone's plate a topic of conversation
- offer seating away from strong smells or noise
- make it easy to arrive late, leave early or participate without eating
- ask privately what would help

Connection does not have to depend on eating the same food.
Belonging grows when a person can participate without having to defend their body.

Research snapshot

Research and clinical experience indicate that sensory eating differences can affect emotional wellbeing as well as nutrition. Autistic people and people with ARFID commonly describe anxiety, isolation and shame. This is why emotional safety and appropriate nutritional support both matter.

The precise experience is different for every person. A supportive assessment considers sensory processing, physical health, nutritional needs, anxiety, learned experiences and the person's wider environment.

Key takeaways

- sensory eating difficulties are real and can carry a heavy emotional burden
- repeated criticism may turn a difficult experience into lasting shame
- anticipatory anxiety can change appetite and digestion
- avoidance and reliance on familiar foods may be protective responses
- social exclusion can be as painful as the eating difficulty itself
- pressure can deepen fear; understanding and choice create safety

A personal message

If you recognise yourself in these pages, I want you to know that your experiences make sense. You may have spent years trying to appear comfortable while your body was working hard to protect you.

You are not immature, awkward or a burden. You are a person whose nervous system deserves to be understood. Naming the emotional impact is not making excuses; it is an important step toward responding with care.

You do not need to become someone else.

You deserve support that helps you understand yourself and feel safer in your own way.

A gentle reminder

This resource offers general education 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, choose support that understands neurodivergence, sensory processing and ARFID and works collaboratively without pressure or shame.

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