

Space to Breathe Therapy
SUPPORT • UNDERSTAND • THRIVE

Sensory Processing, Nutrition and the Brain

Supporting health without creating fear around food

PART 1 OF 2



SENSORY INPUT



THE BRAIN



SAFE FOODS



UNDERSTANDING

Sensory Processing, Nutrition and the Brain

Supporting Health Without Creating Fear Around Food - Part 1 of 2

Introduction

Food is often talked about in terms of calories, vitamins and weight.

We hear messages about eating “clean,” avoiding sugar, reducing carbohydrates or choosing the latest superfood. Social media is full of advice telling us what we should and should not eat, often presented as though there is only one right way to nourish our bodies.

For many people, these messages can feel overwhelming.

For someone with autism, ADHD, sensory processing differences or ARFID, they can feel impossible.

Imagine being told that your health depends on eating a wide variety of foods when your nervous system genuinely experiences many of those foods as unsafe.

Imagine reading that everyone should eat more vegetables when the texture of cooked vegetables makes you gag.

Imagine constantly feeling judged because your safe foods do not fit society's idea of a healthy diet.

This is why conversations about nutrition need to be handled with compassion.

Good nutrition is important.

Our brains and bodies rely on energy, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals to function well.

However, supporting nutrition should never come at the cost of increasing fear, shame or anxiety around food.

The aim is not perfection.

The aim is nourishment.

My Thoughts

Throughout my own journey with ARFID, autism and ADHD, I have heard almost every piece of nutritional advice imaginable.

Some of it has been helpful.

Much of it has not.

For years I believed that because I could not eat like other people, I could never be healthy.

That belief created enormous guilt.

It took time to realise that nutrition is not about comparing my plate with someone else's.

It is about understanding what my body needs and working with my nervous system rather than against it.

As a psychotherapist, I often meet people who desperately want to improve their health but feel trapped between two conflicting realities.

They understand the importance of good nutrition.

Yet many nutritious foods simply do not feel safe to eat.

Rather than criticising themselves, we begin by acknowledging something important:

You cannot build good nutrition on a foundation of fear.

Creating safety must come first.

The Brain Needs Fuel

Although the brain makes up only around two percent of our body weight, it uses approximately twenty percent of the body's energy.

Every thought, memory, movement and emotion depends on a constant supply of nutrients.

The brain requires:

- Glucose for energy.
- Protein to build neurotransmitters.
- Healthy fats to support brain cells.
- Vitamins and minerals to maintain communication between nerve cells.
- Water for almost every neurological process.

When nutrition becomes restricted, the brain has fewer resources available.

This does not mean someone has caused their own difficulties.

It simply highlights why supporting nutrition in a compassionate way is so important.

Understanding the Brain

Our brains are remarkable prediction machines.

They constantly assess whether something feels safe or threatening.

When eating feels calm and predictable, the brain can focus on digestion, learning and enjoyment.

When eating feels frightening or overwhelming, survival becomes the priority.

This is why education alone rarely changes eating behaviour.

Knowing that broccoli contains vitamins does not make it feel less overwhelming if the texture causes genuine distress.

The emotional brain always speaks louder than logic when safety is involved.

Nutrition Is More Than Vitamins

Many people think nutrition simply means eating enough vitamins.

In reality, nutrition is about giving the body everything it needs to function.

This includes:

- Enough energy.
- Regular meals.
- Protein.
- Fibre.
- Healthy fats.
- Hydration.
- Essential vitamins and minerals.

Someone who eats only once a day but chooses highly nutritious foods may still struggle because their body is not receiving consistent energy.

Equally, someone whose diet is limited because of ARFID or sensory differences is not failing.

They are working within the limits of what currently feels safe.

Understanding this helps us move away from judgement and towards practical support.

Why Restriction Affects the Brain

When the brain does not receive enough energy, it naturally tries to conserve resources.

People may notice:

- Increased fatigue.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Irritability.
- Low mood.
- Slower thinking.
- Reduced motivation.
- Increased anxiety.
- Poor memory.

These experiences are often blamed on a lack of willpower.

In reality, they can be signs that the brain is working with limited fuel.

This is particularly relevant for people who regularly forget to eat because of ADHD, experience reduced hunger awareness due to interoception differences or restrict foods because of sensory distress.

The Gut-Brain Connection

Scientists now understand that communication between the gut and the brain works in both directions.

The gut sends information to the brain through nerves, hormones and the immune system.

The brain also influences digestion.

When we feel anxious, stressed or overwhelmed, digestion often changes.

Some people lose their appetite. Others feel nauseous. Some experience stomach pain or changes in bowel habits.

This does not mean that symptoms are “all in the mind.”

It means the brain and digestive system are closely connected.

Supporting one often supports the other.

The Problem With Food Rules

Many people grow up hearing strict rules about food.

“Good foods.”

“Bad foods.”

“You must clear your plate.”

“You cannot have pudding unless you finish your vegetables.”

Although these messages are usually intended to encourage healthy eating, they can create guilt and shame.

For individuals already experiencing anxiety around food, rigid rules may increase distress rather than improve nutrition.

A more compassionate approach asks:

- What feels manageable today?
- What can we build on?
- How can we support nourishment without increasing fear?

These questions create opportunities for growth rather than reinforcing failure.

Progress Looks Different for Everyone

When supporting sensory eating differences, progress should never be measured by comparison.

For one person, progress might be eating three regular meals.

For another, it might be tasting a new food.

Someone else may simply feel comfortable sitting at the dinner table with their family.

Every step matters.
Health is not achieved through perfection.

It is built through hundreds of small, realistic changes that respect the individual and their nervous system.

Supporting Nourishment Compassionately

Compassionate nutrition support begins with what a person can already manage.

Instead of removing safe foods, we can notice what those foods currently provide. One may offer energy. Another may provide protein. A familiar drink may support hydration. A preferred meal may be the reason someone manages to eat during an overwhelming day.

This information gives us somewhere realistic to begin.

Helpful support might include making safe foods easier to access, reducing the number of steps involved in preparing a meal, keeping drinks visible, creating regular opportunities to eat or exploring a tolerated food in another manageable form.

For someone who forgets meals during hyperfocus, an external reminder may be more useful than advice to listen to hunger. For someone who experiences strong sensory reactions, changing the environment or presentation may matter more than explaining the nutrients again.

Support should always reflect the individual. Allergies, intolerances, medical needs, culture, finances, energy, cooking ability and access to food all affect what is possible.

When nutritional intake is very restricted or health is being affected, appropriately qualified medical or nutritional guidance may be important. That guidance should work alongside the person's sensory needs rather than dismissing them.

Small Steps Still Support Health

Nutrition does not have to change all at once.

A small step might be adding one dependable snack to the day, having a drink beside the place where someone works, finding one tolerated source of protein or making a safe meal available in the freezer.

It might mean eating something rather than waiting for the ideal meal that never becomes possible.

It might mean accepting help with shopping, preparation or reminders.

These actions may look simple, but consistency can reduce the strain placed on both the body and the brain.

The question is not, "Is this perfect?"

The more helpful question is, "Does this provide something my body needs in a way my nervous system can currently manage?"

That is a compassionate and meaningful place to begin.

Research Snapshot

Research consistently demonstrates that adequate nutrition supports cognitive function, emotional regulation, attention and overall wellbeing. At the same time, studies involving autistic individuals and people with ARFID highlight that sensory processing differences significantly influence food choices.

Current evidence increasingly supports personalised nutrition approaches that consider neurological differences alongside physical health, recognising that sustainable change is built through collaboration rather than pressure.

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This resource is educational and is not a substitute for individual medical, nutritional or mental-health advice. Seek appropriately qualified support if eating difficulties, restricted intake or digestive symptoms affect health, growth, hydration or daily life.