

ADD TO THE PLATE, DON'T TAKE IT AWAY

Gentle Additions · Safety · Nourishment

PART 2 OF 2

Building nutrition around familiar foods while respecting sensory safety and the nervous system.

By Maggie Learoyd MNCPS

Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Space to Breathe Therapy

Building nutrition without increasing sensory overload

Once we understand that safe foods are the foundation, the next step is not to remove them. It is to build around them.

Improving nutrition does not have to mean changing everything overnight. It may mean making one small addition that the nervous system is able to tolerate. For someone with sensory processing differences, one new sensory experience may be enough for that day; adding several changes at once may be far too much.

Imagine listening to four conversations while bright lights flash and the music keeps changing. That is what too many new food experiences can feel like. Introducing one small, manageable change at a time helps the nervous system remain regulated.

Progress is not measured by how quickly a diet expands.
It is measured by how safe the person continues to feel while exploring change.

Building nutritional density

Nutritional density means increasing beneficial nutrients in foods a person already enjoys. It is not about making every meal look completely different. Sometimes the smallest additions have the greatest impact.

Keep the familiar food	Explore an optional addition
Toast	An egg, tolerated spread or other familiar protein alongside it
Yoghurt	A teaspoon of tolerated seeds or a smooth topping
Pasta	Grated cheese, lentils, minced meat or a blended sauce matching the existing texture
Favourite breakfast	A familiar protein or nourishing drink served alongside

These examples are invitations, not prescriptions. Allergies, intolerances, medical advice, texture needs and individual preferences must always come first.

Every new food is also a new sensory experience

When someone says, “Just try one bite”, they may believe they are asking for something very small. From a sensory perspective, that bite can contain a tremendous amount of information.

That one bite may involve:
a new smell · a new texture · a different temperature · a new sound
when chewing · a different appearance · an unfamiliar aftertaste · new
expectations · uncertainty about how the body may respond

Expanding a range of foods is rarely about bravery. It is about reducing sensory demand enough for curiosity to replace fear.

Understanding the brain

The brain learns through repetition. When a new experience is paired with safety, predictability and positive emotion, acceptance may grow over time. When it is paired with anxiety, pressure or embarrassment, the brain may store it as something to avoid.

This is why forcing children or adults to eat unfamiliar food often has the opposite effect. The goal is not simply exposure; it is positive, consent-led exposure in which the nervous system can remain regulated.

A gentle sensory ladder

Step	Possible interaction
1. Present	The food can be in the room or on the table.
2. Observe	Look at it without pressure to touch or taste.
3. Explore	Smell, serve, stir or touch if the person chooses.
4. Taste	A lick or tiny taste is optional, with permission to stop.
5. Repeat	Return to the safest manageable step another day.

Moving up the ladder is never compulsory. Familiarity can grow through repeated neutral experiences, and returning to an earlier step is not failure.

Supporting children

Children learn about food long before they understand nutrition. They learn from the emotional atmosphere around meals. When mealtimes become battles, food can become linked with stress rather than connection.

Parents understandably worry when a child has a limited diet, and encouragement may come from love. Yet persuading, negotiating or monitoring every mouthful can unintentionally increase anxiety.

Instead, invite a child to participate without requiring them to eat:

- help choose foods in the supermarket
- wash vegetables or place ingredients on a tray
- stir a mixture or use a safe utensil
- smell herbs and spices from a comfortable distance
- touch food without pressure to taste it
- watch others enjoy food without expectation

Every positive interaction counts. Success is not always eating; sometimes it is simply being willing to explore.

Supportive language

Instead of "You liked this last week."	Try "It feels different today. Your safe food is still available."
Instead of "Just one bite."	Try "Would you like it nearby, separate, or not today?"
Instead of "You need to finish."	Try "You can listen to your body. Tell me what would help."

Calm language matters most when it is supported by calm action. The person needs to know that "no" and "not today" will be respected.

Supporting teenagers and adults

Eating difficulties do not disappear when childhood ends. Many adults have spent years masking their challenges. Some avoid work lunches or restaurants; others worry about being judged for eating the same foods repeatedly. By adulthood, the emotional burden can feel heavier than the eating difficulty itself.

Adults deserve support, autonomy and respect just as much as children. The aim is never to create the “perfect diet”. It is to help someone meet their nutritional needs in a way that feels achievable, respectful and emotionally safe.

In my therapy room

One of the first things I say to clients is:

“We are not going to take away the foods that help you feel safe.”

You can often see the relief. Many arrive expecting another lecture about everything they should stop eating. Instead, we begin by understanding what is already working. We identify safe foods, explore sensory experiences, and discuss allergies, intolerances and medical conditions.

Then we ask one simple question:

“What is the smallest change your nervous system feels ready for?”

For one person that may be a spoonful of tolerated yoghurt alongside breakfast. For another, it may be a sprinkle of tolerated seeds on a familiar food. For someone else, it may simply mean allowing a new food to sit on the table without any expectation of tasting it.

These steps may appear tiny. They are not. Each safe experience tells the brain that choice remains possible.

Planning one gentle addition

Food that already feels safe _____	Optional addition _____
How it will stay predictable _____	My permission to stop _____

Maggie's reflection

One of the greatest lessons my own journey has taught me is that healing rarely comes from pushing harder. It comes from understanding better.

When we stop fighting the nervous system and begin working with it, progress feels different: gentler, kinder and more sustainable. Every meal does not have to be perfect. Every day does not have to be a success.

Some days, eating your safe foods is enough. On other days, you may feel ready to add something new. Both are part of the journey. Progress is not measured by how much your plate changes; it is measured by how much fear begins to soften.

Practical strategies

- protect foods that already feel safe
- introduce one sensory change at a time
- add nutrients before removing familiar foods
- respect confirmed allergies, intolerances and medical advice
- build meals around success rather than perfection
- focus on nutritional adequacy rather than an idealised diet
- celebrate curiosity even when a new food is not eaten
- repeat positive experiences without turning them into a test

My gentle plan

What feels safe right now?

What is one optional addition I could explore?

What sensory details must remain the same?

Who can support me without pressure?

Small steps, repeated consistently, can create lasting change.

Myth versus reality

Myth

"Healthy eating means replacing all your favourite foods."

Reality

Healthy eating is about meeting nutritional needs in a way that supports physical health and the nervous system. For many people with sensory processing differences or ARFID, nutrition improves most successfully when suitable foods are added alongside familiar ones rather than replacing them.

Research snapshot

Research into sensory processing, autism and ARFID supports low-pressure, person-centred approaches. Reducing anxiety and respecting sensory differences can improve willingness to explore over time. Nutritional progress is most sustainable when emotional safety, sensory safety and individual medical needs are considered together.

Reflection questions

- Which foods help me feel safe and regulated?
- Do I criticise myself for relying on familiar foods?
- Could I add one small source of nutrition without taking anything away?
- Am I respecting my allergies, intolerances and sensory experiences?
- What would progress look like if I measured confidence instead of perfection?

Before you go

Healthy eating should never come at the cost of feeling unsafe. Your nervous system is not trying to make life difficult; it is trying to protect you.

As both a psychotherapist and someone with lived experience of autism, ADHD and ARFID, I have seen the difference this approach can make. Lasting change does not begin by removing food from someone's plate. It begins by protecting what already feels safe and gently building around it.

Every meal is an opportunity to tell the nervous system: "You are safe."

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 support from an appropriately qualified professional.

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