

Episode 6: Food, Eating, and Autism

Overview

In this episode Jeanne (she/her) looks at an autistic's perspective of eating struggles both through research and personal experience, how this connects to eating disorders, and gives some suggestions for ways to improve autistic eating experiences. She is joined by past guest Gigi (she/her) talking about how texture impacts relationships with food and Katie (they/their) discusses their experiences both with food and treatment for anorexia.

Key Points:

- In the same way physical textures can read differently to autistics, food textures can be very troublesome too, leading to many autistics experiencing challenges around eating. Additionally, some research has shown many autistics have a genetic difference that causes a hypersensitivity to bitterness, which can also impact eating. Instead of viewing these struggles as a behavior, by listening to first-hand accounts of autistic experiences around eating we can try different techniques to improve autistic mental and physical health.
- Multiple studies have found between 20-30% of women in treatment for anorexia nervosa meet diagnostic criteria for autism. Autistics struggling to eat may have very different needs to address regarding eating habits, yet this is not taken into account when considering possible treatment options.
- Both texture of the food and stress levels of the autistic are key. By changing the texture through different food preparations (blending, freezing, etc.), or by altering the time or place the autistic is eating, outcomes can be dramatically improved.
- Time: 45:47

Quotes:

"It's not a 'phobia' if it genuinely and consistently causes you harm so you try to avoid it, even if other people don't see it." - Jeanne

"I'm chewing and I know I need to eat, but I just can't seem to make myself swallow, or I finally do but then get incredibly nauseated. It's like if you suddenly smelled something rotten or otherwise awful while eating and your body just goes 'nope, not doing this anymore.'" - Jeanne

"Have you ever been really stressed about something, or had a bad flu, and you knew you should eat, or even wanted to eat, but absolutely everything sounded awful or even made you feel nauseated to think of? Or the only thing that sounded edible was bland carbs like toast? I get that pretty much anytime I get out-sensoried or stressed." - Jeanne

"Food is love in a lot of places. I'm from south Louisiana, so when someone cooks you gumbo or cooks you etouffee or shrimp Creole - these things take a lot of time. And I have always associated that with love... My goal isn't to offend or to put you down, it's just...if I put it in my mouth, there's a whole other reaction. There's all this stuff that happens with my body, like a revulsion. And then my brain just freaks out." - Gigi

"Believe us when we say it is not just because we want to be difficult. I've been physically ill after trying to force myself to do something, to keep up appearances." - Gigi

"I went two full weeks where I didn't consume any food. I could drink water and that was about it. I was really stressed and I was going through an emotionally hard time with a relationship, and I was in my first year of finals and my body went, 'Nope, that's, it, you cannot consume food. Any food is bad.'" - Katie

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“It varies depending on my pain levels, my stress levels, how social I’ve been - all heavily influence what types of food I can eat and the amounts I can eat. And it’s very frustrating when I see scholarly literature that treats it as a choice... It’s not a choice. It’s something that I have no control over and will literally start gagging and feel horrifically nauseated by.” - Jeanne

“I am about as privileged as you can get on this issue. I do the grocery orders for my house, all the cooking, I have relatively few other dietary limitations, and I still really struggle to get food in myself sometimes.” - Jeanne

Articles referenced:

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