

Autistic adults' lived experiences of food and eating

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BACKGROUND

The aim of this study is to explore the large knowledge gaps that currently exist concerning the lived experiences of autistic adults regarding their food and eating.

Previous research on autistic infants, children and youth suggest that atypical eating behaviours are highly prevalent, with the most widely cited issue being food selectivity, or limited repertoire of foods consumed. However, these issues are variably defined in the literature, with a lack of standardised definitions.

The health consequences and trajectories of these issues appear to vary from mild cases with no health risks, to more severe cases with risks such as nutritional deficiencies.

Autism-related mechanisms, such as sensory sensitivities, executive functioning limitations, and tendencies towards routinised and ritualised behaviours around mealtimes may also play a role in these issues.

Importantly, much of this research is based on parental report measures, and typically decontextualises eating-related issues (focusing primarily on functioning “deficits” located within the autistic child).

More recent evidence suggests that contextual factors (such as eating environments, and social influences) can also impact food and eating-related issues in autistic individuals, however these factors are rarely accounted for in the literature.

There is a need to develop our understanding of how these issues present into adulthood for autistic individuals, to consider the various extrinsic factors that may also influence their experiences, and to ground this understanding in the voices of autistic adults themselves.

FINDINGS

Interviews with autistic adults have highlighted the unique differences in their lived experiences regarding food and eating.

- Some reported sensation-seeking approaches towards foods, rather than sensory-related aversions to foods. Others highlighted the role of interoceptive awareness in their eating behaviours, with some reporting lack of awareness and others reporting hyper-sensitivity to hunger and thirst cues.
- The role of social influences upon eating behaviours and previous experiences of judgement from co-diners, family and peers towards their eating have also been highlighted, with various impacts. Supportive social influences were highlighted as beneficial for participants and their eating.
- Some participants have reported their food choices are underpinned by concerns such as sourcing sustainable ingredients and buying from local farmers.
- Participants reflected on their experiences of eating in childhood, highlighting how autonomy in adulthood has allowed them to eat in accordance with their own needs as well as support their autistic children's eating needs.
- Participants acknowledged the significant mental load involved with organising, planning and preparing meals.
- Many participants are eager to raise awareness about these issues and learn more about others experiences.

“I have thought so many times if I could just eat a pill every morning and that had every nutrient you know that my body needed to function, I would absolutely do that. I hate thinking about what to eat.”

Participant