



## Haley Moss

### Special Topics

<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/blog/icing-on-cake-autism-picky-eating>

I used to go to birthday parties just for the cake. No, really, I did. I always found the social aspects of birthday parties to be incredibly difficult. Too many people, who was I supposed to talk to, would the birthday girl or birthday boy like the gift, and the food. Oh, the food. What was I supposed to do?

But the cake was my saving grace. I was always a cake-eating kid. It can be birthday cake, cupcakes, chocolate cake, or cheesecake – I didn't care, I would happily eat it. I am a picky eater in almost every other aspect of my life, but I never discriminated against cake in regards any flavor or frosting variety. Most of these birthday parties – at least, when I was younger – were really simple. They involved pizza and cake. Pizza was not my thing, so my parents would accommodate my picky eating with fast food or lunch at home before party time. And when the social part of birthday parties was rough, the cake was there. It was the reward, and after my slice or two, it meant I could leave sticky social situations.

It's hard being autistic. It's also hard when you have to prioritize your challenges and internal battles. The hard battle not worth fighting was food. There are always things that are more difficult than picky eating with autism – there is the aspect of making friends, being part of the community, surviving school settings, happiness, independent living, the list goes on. Simply put, adding more foods to the list isn't really a high-ranking thing in the big scheme of things that are more important to my wellbeing. It is a personal choice.

The most noticeable autism quirk of mine is my picky eating relationship with food. For some people, autism is restrictive diets by choice. For me, it's a challenge. I am not one of those gluten-free, dairy-free, special diets to minimize or "cure" autism eaters. I am simply an anxious, picky eater, who didn't "outgrow" it. It is part of who I am. My friends and those who are accepting of me don't care and write it off as one of those quirks that makes me, me.

I joke I probably add one new food or food group per decade. As far as the birthday parties – the landscape changed when I finally tried and fell in love with pizza at around age 12 or 13. I am pretty sure that was my most recent “discovery.” Except the pizza parties weren’t aplenty, until I got to college where pizza was a staple of every freshman’s diet, and then I didn’t stand out for being the kid who could exist exclusively on chicken tenders and pizza, and then pizza luncheons became a popular thing in law school, and thus I blended in again within the social food landscape.

I wish I had a simple explanation for why I am a picky eater or why food is challenging for people on the autism spectrum. However, the only person I can speak for is myself. Food is something that I think gets clouded in judgment or shame but it shouldn’t be – are we eating too much, too little, not healthy enough? Food is a complicated thing, overall. It’s a full-on sensory experience and when you are autistic, sensory overloads can happen. Food is not just how the texture hits my teeth and tongue, but it is also the colors, the shapes, the tastes, the smells – it is a lot to take in. I am also someone who likes comfort. I take comfort in routine and familiar foods.

Trying something new is a scary proposition. It is a disruption in routine and familiarity, which are staples in my life and are often calming to people on the autism spectrum. You can ask me to try something new and I will almost always say no. I’ve developed a lot of social coping mechanisms for politely declining in a way that doesn’t make people feel like they have to accommodate me or think I am being rude, because it’s hard to be an adult picky eater. I am afraid not to like something, not to like the smell, the taste, look like a toddler spitting something out or choking on it or just being uncertain, or worse – socially misstep and offend somebody.

Food is also an inherently social experience, which makes it harder as an adult. There are a lot of social gatherings that revolve around food, people coming from far away for holiday meals, all savoring and sharing dishes and flavors. It is scary to stick out in those settings. But the right people get it. The marriage of social and food is difficult I’ve been accepting of my differences as have most people in my life. Most understand if I eat beforehand, because trying something new or venturing outside of my comfort zone is simply too much.

I own it though. I made it through college and early adulthood with my magic food groups of the few things I am willing to eat. I am able to maintain a relatively healthy lifestyle too with moderation and balance. It isn’t that I am unwilling to grow and try things necessarily – it is difficult. It takes time and there aren’t deadlines on progress for me. I was doing jigsaw puzzles before I could talk and it doesn’t mean that one day I won’t be the definition of a “foodie.” Right now though, food is not a top priority in terms of the battles and challenges I have overcome and continue to overcome and adapt to. One day, it might be. But today is not that day. And that is totally okay.

But I get to forget about being a picky eater if I am around the right people and if I still go to birthday parties for the cake, because now I have the social strategies to make it through the hard parts thanks to prioritizing those challenges. Oh, and it still feels great to have cake at the parties.

**Haley Moss was diagnosed with autism at age three and is currently a law student at the University of Miami. She is a visual pop artist and is the author of two books: *Middle School: The Stuff Nobody Tells You About* and *A Freshman Survival Guide for College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*. To learn more about Haley, you can visit her website at [haleymossart.com](http://haleymossart.com) or follow her on social media.**