



FINDING CONNECTION BEYOND THE TABLE:

NAVIGATING FOOD-CENTERED EVENTS WITH CARE AND COMPASSION

Overview

Food brings people together – but for those navigating eating disorders, disordered eating, or sensory sensitivities, food-centered events can be a challenge or feel overwhelming. Here are some practical strategies for attending gatherings when eating feels complicated, and some actionable tips for hosts who want to create inclusive spaces, because everyone deserves to feel welcome – exactly as they are.

These thoughts can be powerful and may take up space that detracts from our enjoyment of the event. dit: Rimmabondarenko

It helps to remember that these feelings are valid. They are not a sign of weakness, but more so of awareness. The act of recognizing these emotions – rather than pushing them away – is a form of honouring, and of self-respect. Giving yourself grace means allowing room for discomfort without judgment, and pushing through that discomfort.

1 Social Settings Can Be Difficult - Give yourself Grace

Key Message 1: Connection matters more than food. Struggling with food or eating doesn't mean that you don't belong. You deserve to connect in ways that feel safe and authentic for you.

Attending a food-centered, social event — a wedding, a staff luncheon, a holiday dinner — can bring up a mix of anticipation and unease. On the surface, it's a celebration of connection between friends, but beneath that, it can stir up a lot of complex feelings, sensations, and fears.

Food is everywhere — woven into how we gather, celebrate, and connect. It's often how we show love, gratitude, mark milestones, and share in each others' cultures. When your relationship with food is layered with anxiety, a journey of recovery, or restrictions, being surrounded by it can feel overwhelming.

For someone with lived or living experience with an eating disorder, disordered eating, or sensory sensitivities, food-centred events can feel like stepping into unknown territory every single time.

“Will there be something I can eat comfortably?” “What if someone comments on my plate — or notices that I don't have one?”

2 Navigating Events (for Event-Goers)

Key Message 2: Everyone deserves choice and flexibility. There's no single “right” way to participate in a social gathering. Your comfort matters, your choices are valid, and you are allowed to take up space in your own way.

The truth is, coping strategies in social settings don't always look graceful — and they don't have to. **Having a plan can help.** Maybe this is a plan for how long you will stay, or who you will sit beside. It might mean rehearsing phrases that allow you to gracefully step away from a situation or to redirect a conversation. And if you need an exit strategy, that's okay too. **Taking care of yourself is not a failure – it's self-care in action.**

Start with intention. Before the event, take a quiet moment to ground yourself.

Ask, What do I want from this gathering? And what do I need right now?

Maybe it's reconnecting with a friend, meeting someone new, sharing a laugh, or enjoying the party atmosphere. Focusing on connection and experience - rather than food - can help shift the focus from pressure to presence.

Make a plan for support. If possible, bring a trusted friend, someone who may know what you are going through, and who can help support your goals. You might agree on a signal or a short phrase that lets each other know that you need a break. Even a quick hand signal, a pat on the back, or a text can help you feel less alone.

Allow yourself some flexibility. You don't owe anyone explanations for how you participate. It's okay to step outside for a few minutes, to choose not to eat, or to leave early if that's what you need. **The goal isn't to meet others' expectations — it's to respect your own boundaries.**

Check out our "Conversation Starters and Stoppers" [here](#).

nedic.ca/conversation-starters-stoppers

When the event is over, take time to decompress, do something small to care for yourself. Reflect on what went well. Maybe you stayed longer than you expected, or managed to enjoy a genuine laugh. Those small wins deserve recognition — they represent resilience and progress, and deserve to be celebrated.

③ How To Be A Supportive Host

Key Message 3: Small, thoughtful actions create welcoming spaces.

Inclusivity is not about perfection – it's about presence. When we care enough to notice, we create spaces where everyone can breathe a little easier, and feel a little comfier.

While guests navigate their feelings, hosts and planners have their own opportunity to lean in, to learn, to help shape spaces that are built on compassion and not assumption. Inclusivity doesn't have to be perfect – but it can be intentional.

If you are a host or a planner, your actions can make a bigger difference for someone who is struggling. **You don't need to have all the answers – just a willingness to think beyond the plate.** Consider offering a food-free event that centres around a craft or an activity instead. It's a great idea to offer an option for feedback with your invite:

"Is there anything else that I can do to make this event accessible, and inclusive for you? Please don't hesitate to let us know."

This sends a signal that you are open and willing to provide a safe space for your guests.

Provide options: This might mean a range of foods, or making it clear that guests can opt in or out of food-centered parts of the event. Build in variety: Include games, art, music, fidgets, or conversation prompts that don't revolve around food.

That way, participation doesn't depend on what's on someone's plate. A host might say, "We'll have snacks available if anyone wants them, and there's plenty to do if not." That simple sentence removes pressure and opens space for choice.

Be mindful of language: Words like "dig in", "don't be shy", or "you have to try this" may seem friendly but can add pressure.

Try saying "There's food if you'd like." or "Help yourself whenever you're ready." Language can be inclusive while shifting the focus from eating.

Respect boundaries: If someone chooses not to eat or participates quietly, that's okay! They are still part of the event in a way that feels right for them.

Remember: You don't have to anticipate every need to make a difference. Small, thoughtful gestures – like labelling foods clearly, offering quiet seating areas, or simply checking in with a gentle "How are you doing?" – can make guests feel safe and seen.

Closing Reflection

At the heart of every gathering is connection – the reason we celebrate!

When we remind ourselves that connection matters more than food, we make room for joy, compassion, and belonging in all its forms.

For those navigating food- and eating-related challenges, your presence matters more than your plate. For those hosting, your thoughtfulness can transform an event from stressful to safe.

Together, we can build spaces where everyone can show up, connect, and feel welcome.

