

## Editorial

# Welcome to the table: the entrée

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W elcome to this volume of *Attachment: New Directions in Psychotherapy and Relational Psychoanalysis*. I am guest editing this special issue and begin by acknowledging the huge contribution made to the journal by Orit Badouk Epstein, who has decided to stand down as editor after five years at the helm. From 2017 she led the editorial board to produce eleven volumes of cutting-edge content by high-profile authors. Having curated this edition, I appreciate how much time, thought, and coordination the role requires.

During the last challenging two years in particular, when Covid anxieties, lockdowns, and restrictions highlighted the vital importance of attachment relationships in the human psyche, Orit provided consistency and continuity for her colleagues on the editorial board, whilst at the same time curating, writing, and editing a wonderful book, *Shame Matters: Attachment and Relational Perspectives for Psychotherapists* (Badouk Epstein, 2022), a valuable new resource for practitioners.

I give my personal thanks to Orit for her considerable creative input to this journal and speak for everyone involved in sending best wishes to her for all her future projects.

Currently putting together the next volume is the new editor, Dr Aysha Begum. Aysha is a clinical psychologist and systemic therapist working in the National Health Service. She brings twenty years' clinical, teaching, and research expertise, including experience of publishing in peer-reviewed journals, to her new role. She is also an attachment-based psychoanalytic psychotherapist and Bowlby Centre member with a private practice. We welcome her to the team and look forward to a new era for the *Attachment* journal under her auspices.

In the meantime, this special issue focuses on what, and how we eat. Food has the power to bring people together and nourish relationships, or to divide. It is a potent medium for communication, for community-building, for control, and for attack. It carries a powerful political punch. It evokes our earliest experiences, has a significant presence in couple relationships, and nourishes our sense of belonging to groups and communities. Despite this key role in attachment, psychotherapy literature has paid scant attention to its many relational functions.

Discussing food-related associations in the therapy room can provide a portal into the context of our clients' lives, a portal that leads directly to the heart of attachment and identity. We use it to self-medicate and to celebrate, to reward and to nurture. How many psychotherapists routinely ask all their clients (not just those whose weight is a cause for concern, or who tell us they are diabetic, suffer from food allergies, etc.) about the foods they enjoy or dislike? Whether they find pleasure in cooking and feeding others, or if they are reluctant chefs? About who plans meals, shops, cooks, and washes up? About what time of the day they eat, or what they call their meals (lunch, dinner, tea, supper ...)? Who they eat with, and whether their partners, families, and friendship groups share their dietary needs and preferences? Whether they have inherited recipes, cooking utensils, or family traditions regarding foodways from previous generations? Whether their diet reflects their religious or cultural heritage? Yet there are stories relating to all this and more that encapsulate each person's attachment history and sense of self.

Anybody who has been around babies will have observed feeding times; breast or bottle, scheduled or on demand, relaxed, intimate, and playful or hurried, functional, perhaps resentful, intrusive, or desperate. What is ingested comes sweetened with the bonding hormone, oxytocin, or heavily laced with the stress hormone, cortisol. The little one takes in more than breast milk or formula. As Priya Basil noted: "What we eat enters our bodies and becomes part of us in an intimate way. Food forms and reveals us" (Basil, 2019, p. 3). We are introduced to the wider social world at the table and mealtimes are deeply relational experiences. Food is a significant ingredient in how we relate to others and to ourselves.

Here is an informal toddler observation concerning food and the building blocks of attachment.

Recently, at the end of a tiring day, I sat upstairs on a bus to come home. Covid infection rates were high and I hoped for peace and quiet, and space around me to wind down. Instead, a man in his late thirties came up to the top deck carrying his daughter of around three years of age. She was grizzly and complaining. They sat directly in front of me in the front seat. I felt intruded upon and anticipated the child's moaning escalating, turning into conflict with her father. This is not what happened. The ensuing conversation between them was followed closely by me.

F: Now really, Gracie, why are you complaining?

G: I want a lollipop.

F: But you know there is a rule about lollipops. Do you remember it?

G: (still grumbling) I can have one a day.

F: And have you had your lollipop today?

G: Yes.

F: So, you can have another one tomorrow.

He attempted to distract her by pointing at landmarks and engaging her in conversation, but Gracie was not placated.

F: Really, Gracie, what is this obsession with sugar? You have had today's lollipop and soon we'll have tea.

The child was still not satisfied and his continuing attempts to divert her attention failed. Her grouching persisted. A few minutes later, the man spoke again.

F: Gracie, I acknowledge your desire for a lollipop and you *shall* have one tomorrow. Now that is enough on that subject.

Little Gracie finally abandoned her attempts to influence her father's position on the subject of sweets. Shortly after, she piped up:

G: Daddy, kiss me.

F: Ok, where would you like me to kiss you? On your hair?

G: No, my cheek.

F: Ok, there. Would you like another?

G: No, just one a day.

This little girl may not have got her way regarding lollipops but she did take in and digest her father's interest in her, his sense of her as a person in her own right, worthy of his attention, and his fair, clear boundaries. To paraphrase Priya Basil, what she gained from this conversation about food became part of her in an intimate way.

Food concerns more than basic survival: it is a vital ingredient in our relationships, our place in the world, our political, social, and spiritual values. It is currently Ramadan and many of my neighbours are fasting until sundown when they join their families or mosque community to break their fast at the iftar meal. During daylight hours, as their bellies grumble, Muslims think of those around the world who are without adequate sustenance. Political unrest, war, natural disaster, global warming, loss of biodiversity, and soil erosion due to over-farming or monoculture—or just plain poverty—leave people malnourished or starving.

Meanwhile, fasts are a way of life—and of death—for some. Self-starvation, as with other eating disorders, has complex causes. They are a wordless communication of relational distress. Obesity levels are sky-rocketing in many parts of the world. In fact, it was through investigating the puzzle of obesity and why treatments have such poor long-term success rates that Vincent Felitti stumbled upon the connection between not only weight-related illnesses but a veritable encyclopaedia of somatic, mental health, and social sequelae of adverse childhood experiences—the now-extensive ACEs research (Felitti, 2002; Felitti et al., 1998). In a recent editorial for this journal, Simon Partridge wrote with passion:

I would like to suggest that those currently involved in succouring human well-being, whether professionals, survivors, or community enablers, now gather under the growing banner of the ACEs movement. The ACEs movement reiterates the progressive intentions of Bowlby and his colleagues. It puts at the heart of families and societies the need for safety and secure attachment, and wills the resources to achieve this. It

seeks to prevent through good primary care and peer group support many of those ills of adversity appearing in the first place. (Partridge, 2021, p. xi)

Through facilitating secure attachment, psychotherapy aims to break the cycle of adverse childhood experiences. This special issue, following on from a Bowlby Centre conference in February 2022, aims to pique appetite for bringing this everyday but oft-ignored ingredient to the therapy table.

The conference, “Attachment, community, identity, and food”, was an opportunity to bring people together—safely—to share thoughts about food and to eat together. We were still under the shadow of Covid and two years of restrictions had left many of us hungry for contact “in 3D”. Others attended online, drawn by the theme but unable, or reluctant, to come in person. Just two days previously, Russia had invaded Ukraine. The world held its breath, fearing a return to the days when threat of nuclear weapons hung over us. We knew that there would soon be a crisis of displaced people, escaping the horrors unfolding in their country, searching for refuge. Governments, organisations, and individuals wondered what could be done to help. Our pleasure at coming together to connect over food was tainted with anxiety.

There has been an outpouring of compassion for the Ukrainian people, quite rightly. But treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers has long been a political hot potato and those from other regions of the world, including Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Myanmar, and Venezuela, equally escaping war-torn countries or persecution, are not always greeted warmly. One of our presenters, Rebecca Smith, is a horticultural therapist who has worked with marginalised client groups, including people with mental health diagnoses, refugees, and victims of torture. She spoke movingly of her experiences on allotments with deeply traumatised individuals who could begin to find a measure of safety and peace preparing the soil, sowing seeds, tending plants, and reaping harvests. In this environment, so far from familiar landscapes, asylum seekers could begin to connect with each other and local allotment owners. In learning about crops that flourish in this climate they were able to reminisce and grieve for the foodstuffs of their homelands. Though often anxious regarding their right to remain in the United Kingdom, individuals were valued and found a sense of community developing as tasks were shared and crops harvested together.

Psychotherapist and cookery teacher Charlotte Hastings described for us projects she set up during Covid lockdowns to support the well-being of community group members. Often from disadvantaged backgrounds, most of those taking part struggle with poverty, isolation, and resulting poor diet. Many had also experienced multiple adverse experiences during their early lives. Working with adults and families, Charlotte organised outdoor cookery sessions on organic farms where participants could forage for fresh ingredients which they prepared together then cooked on camping stoves, in clay ovens, or fire pits. Each group then sat around a campfire to eat together. For many, children and adults alike, it was an eye-opening

experience to see crops growing and to taste fresh vegetables and herbs that were unfamiliar as their low income limits the range of foodstuffs normally available to them.

Toni Hoskins opened our eyes to some of the challenges faced by another group who are often marginalised and excluded; those with major visual impairments. Toni specialises in therapeutic work with individuals and families affected by sight loss and shared her experiences with people who are blind or have severely restricted vision. Disability can impact on the relationship with food and, thus, with other people. Losing one's sight, as Toni did overnight, impacts on numerous areas of life and presents complex relational challenges. Becoming dependent for so many practical and intimate needs, including relying on others to shop and cook, can perhaps feel threatening to those with avoidant/dismissing or disorganised/unresolved patterns of attachment. It is a huge blow to self-esteem when it is no longer possible to express love for one's partner or family by cooking for them. Eating out becomes difficult for those who cannot navigate around a restaurant, see a chair or table, plate or cutlery, or read a menu. The strain and shame may prevent them from joining in with social occasions and celebrations, or the embarrassment of others can lead to visually impaired persons being overlooked when it comes to invitations to social gatherings.

Toni also described the extra challenges faced by those with severe visual impairment during lockdowns when food parcels were sometimes delivered (but not reliably), sometimes contained foodstuffs they could not eat, with labels they could not read. When venturing out to buy food, the need to maintain social distancing often proved too much; how can one judge a distance of two metres without vision?

Toni has contributed another paper to this journal, further raising awareness of the difficulties faced by people who suffer sight loss, but also their triumphs in navigating the social arena and relationship with food.

Professor Julia Buckroyd, who has specialised in working with eating disordered clients for almost forty years, also features in this issue. At the conference she spoke about disordered eating as communication, but also as an alternative identity when insecure attachment scuppers achievement of developmental milestones such as forming friendships with peers that enable young people to eventually find a place in the world for themselves where they are attached to, but separate from, their family of origin. Medical interventions and treatment programmes then confirm the sense of self as "a person with an eating disorder" who often has little else with which to define her- or himself. Friendships formed with others in treatment further consolidate this highly limited self-experience. One aim of psychotherapy becomes the kick-starting of developmental processes leading to individuation.

With my own talk as the entrée to the main menu, a rich and satisfying feast was on offer.

We were exceptionally fortunate to have, as keynote speaker, Richard Ratcliffe. As husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, Richard talked to us about her experience as

a political hostage in Iran for almost six years. After spending Nowruz, Persian New Year, with her family in Tehran she was arrested under fabricated charges at the airport in April 2016 as she prepared to fly home to London. Held for the first eight and a half months in solitary confinement by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, initial shock and disbelief turned to fear and then despair. Conditions were grim, and rations poor. Her family was permitted occasional visitation rights and could bring in some fruit to supplement her meagre diet, all they could do to comfort her and show their care for her. Each visitor was rigorously searched before being admitted, including baby Gabriella whose nappies were checked for smuggled items.

After these months in solitary confinement, Nazanin was moved to a public women's wing at Evin under the supervision of the regular Prison Service. Here, a sense of community existed amongst the inmates. Some women fell into depression, lost their appetites, and stopped joining in at meal-times but were cajoled by the others into eating to build up their strength. The quality and portions of rations were little better, and some food items were drugged by the guards, but families could more easily provide staples and eventually were even able to buy an oven for the women. This enabled prisoners to cook for themselves and their visitors. Nazanin could make treats for Gabriella, an opportunity to be "mummy" again. Richard described how painful it was for Nazanin when her daughter would not eat the dishes she had prepared, and how distressing this was for Gabriella too.

Cooking together nourished inmates' camaraderie. It helped to structure the long, tedious days, distract from anxiety or hopelessness, revive the appetite for life. The women of Evin even planned to compile a cookery book, a gesture expressing their refusal to give up their humanity or to be crushed; it is both a statement of protest and a triumph of spirit.

However, Covid hit and Nazanin was discharged from Evin to house arrest at her parents' home. Here she was able to continue cooking but lost the sense of camaraderie that had existed in prison, and her ordeal still did not end. Once her initial five-year sentence elapsed she was given an additional one.

Both Nazanin and Richard used hunger strikes as a means of speaking out. Refusal to eat is a communication, not just to our families but a powerful protest to our governments: as Richard described it, "the only way to claim control in injustice." His own hunger strikes were efforts to pressurise the British and Iranian governments to reach a resolution that would bring Nazanin home, but also to keep her plight, and that of his family, in the minds of the public. For twenty-one days in the autumn of 2021 he withheld food whilst camped outside the Foreign Office. As he became weak and chilled, Nazanin begged him to stop. However, to keep Nazanin's desperately cruel situation in the public eye, supporter Margaret Owen, an eighty-nine-year old human rights lawyer and founder of Widows for Peace Through Democracy, took over the fast. The baton was then taken up by members of the Women's Solidarity Action to Free Nazanin, with a different woman each day pledging to fast until she returned home.

Less than three weeks after the conference, on 17 March 2022, Nazanin was finally freed and returned to the UK to join her husband and daughter after almost six years' detention. Another Anglo-Iranian political hostage, Anoosheh Ashoori, was also released. A photograph published the following day in the press shows Nazanin making pizza with Gabriella.

We all send our thanks to Richard for his very moving talk, and wish Nazanin, Richard, and Gabriella all the time and support they will inevitably need to recover from their ordeal.

Nazanin's homecoming is something to celebrate. I hope that one day we shall see the publication of the Evin women's cookery book.

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