

# Understanding Autism & Sensory Needs



Different sensory experiences are a normal part of autism.

Our senses help us understand and navigate the world. Autistic people may experience sensory information differently – some things can feel overwhelming, while others may feel very calming or even needed.

## WHAT ARE SENSORY NEEDS?

♥ Sensory needs relate to how we take in, process and respond to sensory information.

Everyone has preferences, but autistic people are more likely to experience:

- ♥ Sensory sensitivities (things can feel too much)
- ♥ Sensory seeking (needing more input)
- ♥ A mix of both

These are not choices – they are how our nervous system is wired.



## SENSORY EXPERIENCES MIGHT INCLUDE:



**Sounds**  
 e.g. volume, buzzing, music



**Lights**  
 e.g. brightness, flicker, natural light



**Textures**  
 e.g. clothing, fabrics, surfaces, food



**Movement**  
 e.g. balance, movement, proprioception



**Smells**  
 e.g. strong smells, perfume, cleaning products



**Temperature**  
 e.g. hot, cold, changes in temperature



**Food & taste**  
 e.g. taste, texture, smell, food combinations



**Environments**  
 e.g. crowds, busy spaces, noise levels

## SENSORY OVERWHELM MIGHT FEEL LIKE:

- ♥ Feeling anxious or panicky
- ♥ Irritability or frustration
- ♥ Shutting down or going quiet
- ♥ Meltdowns
- ♥ Difficulty concentrating
- ♥ Needing to escape
- ♥ Physical discomfort or pain
- ♥ Feeling exhausted
- ♥ Nausea or feeling unwell



♥ Overwhelm is not a choice – it is the nervous system saying "this is too much right now".

## SENSORY SEEKING MIGHT LOOK LIKE:

- ♥ Moving the body (jumping, spinning, pacing)
- ♥ Fidgeting or using hands
- ♥ Deep pressure (hugs, heavy blankets, weighted items)
- ♥ Making sounds or vocalising
- ♥ Chewing, mouthing or using oral input
- ♥ Looking at lights or patterns
- ♥ Seeking strong smells or tastes
- ♥ Repetitive movements (rocking, bouncing)



♥ Seeking input can help the body feel regulated, focused and connected.

## GENTLE SENSORY SUPPORT IDEAS



♥ Reduce loud or unexpected sounds.



♥ Create safe, quiet spaces or calm down areas.



♥ Offer movement breaks and proprioceptive activities.



♥ Support comfortable clothing and preferred textures.



♥ Provide sensory tools that support regulation and focus.



♥ Use predictable routines and clear expectations.



♥ Allow time to rest, recover and reset.



♥ Listen, observe and adapt – every person is different.

## IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER

- ♥ There is no "right" or "wrong" way to have sensory needs.
- ♥ Sensory needs can change from day to day (or within the same day).
- ♥ What helps one person may not help another.
- ♥ Sensory support is not "extra" – it can be an important part of wellbeing, learning and participation.
- ♥ Understanding sensory needs helps build connection, trust and inclusion.



Sensory support is not about changing the person. It is about changing the environment and approach so they can feel safe, understood and able to thrive.

