



Overstimulation Reset: When Everything Feels Like Too Much

An explainer, sensory map, and "lower the input" checklist · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- Overstimulation happens when your brain receives more sensory input than it can comfortably process.
- It is especially common for neurodivergent people, highly sensitive people, parents, and anyone who is stressed or tired.
- The fastest relief is usually reducing input, not pushing through.

What overstimulation feels like

Noise, light, touch, smells, crowds, conversations, notifications, and even your own to-do list all count as input. When the total gets too high, you might feel irritable, panicky, tearful, frozen, or desperate to get away. Some people describe it as their skin "buzzing" or their brain "short-circuiting."

- Snapping at loved ones over small things
- Needing to cover your ears or close your eyes
- Feeling unable to think, decide, or speak
- A sudden urge to leave or hide
- Shutting down and going quiet
- Feeling exhausted afterward, sometimes for hours

Why some people get overstimulated more easily

People differ in how strongly they respond to sensory input. Researchers call this sensory processing sensitivity, and it is a normal trait found in a sizable portion of the population. Overstimulation is also common in ADHD and autism, and during anxiety, poor sleep, hormonal changes, illness, and parenting young children.

Your capacity changes day to day. Something you handle easily when rested may feel unbearable when depleted.

Overstimulation or anxiety?

	Overstimulation	Anxiety
Main trigger	Too much input right now	Worry about what might happen
What helps most	Reducing input (quiet, dim, alone)	Calming thoughts and the body, facing fears
Can they overlap?	Yes. Overstimulation can trigger anxiety	Yes. Anxiety lowers tolerance for input

What the research says

Sensory processing sensitivity is a measurable temperament trait linked with deeper processing of stimuli and greater reactivity to overstimulating environments (Aron & Aron, 1997).

Sensory processing patterns shape how people respond to everyday environments, and adjusting the environment can reduce distress (Dunn, 1997).

Tool: My Sensory Map

Fill in what overwhelms you and what soothes you for each sense. Use it to plan your days and your environment.

Sense	What overwhelms me	What soothes me
Sound		
Sight / light		
Touch / clothing		
Smell		
Movement		
People / social		
Mental load		

Lower the Input Checklist (when it's too much)

- ☐ Step away to a quieter space, even a bathroom or your car
- ☐ Dim lights or close your eyes for 60 seconds
- ☐ Put on noise-cancelling headphones or earplugs
- ☐ Silence your phone and notifications

- ☐ Say a short script: "I need five minutes. I'll be right back."
- ☐ Use deep pressure: a weighted blanket, a firm hug, or pressing your palms together
- ☐ Breathe out slowly and let your shoulders drop
- ☐ Postpone decisions until you feel settled

Strategies to try

- **Plan recovery time.** After busy events, schedule quiet time rather than another commitment.
- **Carry a sensory kit.** Earplugs, sunglasses, a soft object, gum, or a comforting scent.
- **Reduce background input.** Turn off the TV when no one is watching, and declutter one visible area.
- **Tell people your signals.** Agree on a word or gesture that means "I'm getting overloaded."
- **Notice the build-up.** Overstimulation often creeps up. Check in hourly on busy days.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Use a sensory budget.** Think of your daily capacity for input as a budget. Before a busy day, decide where to "spend" it and where to save, such as skipping the radio on the drive home after a loud event.
- **Try "heavy work."** Occupational therapists use proprioceptive input, such as wall push-ups, carrying heavy bags, or pressing palms together hard, to help an overloaded nervous system settle.
- **Set a recovery ratio.** For every two hours of high input, plan about 15 minutes of low input. Adjust the ratio to what your body needs.
- **Create one-sense refuges.** You don't always need to leave. Reduce just one channel: sunglasses for light, earplugs for sound, or a soft hoodie for touch.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

When do I most often feel overstimulated? What tends to be happening?

What are my earliest signs that I'm reaching my limit?

Where in my life could I reduce unnecessary input?

What would I want the people around me to understand about this?

When to reach out for support

If overstimulation is frequent, affects work or relationships, or you wonder whether ADHD, autism, or sensory sensitivity might be part of your experience, a therapist can help you understand your needs and build a life that fits them.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Aron, E. N., & Aron, A. (1997). Sensory-processing sensitivity and its relation to introversion and emotionality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(2), 345–368.

Dunn, W. (1997). The impact of sensory processing abilities on the daily lives of young children and their families. *Infants & Young Children*, 9(4), 23–35.

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