



# ADHD Women Unite – Session Summary

**Topic:** Sensory Sensitivities & ADHD Women – Understanding Overwhelm, Regulation & Sensory Needs

**Guest Speaker:** Community discussion with contribution from Liz Marven (Cornwall Partnership NHS Foundation Trust)

**Facilitator:** Katherine Irvine

**Format:** Online peer support session via Microsoft Teams

**Approximate Attendance:** 8–10 participants

**Key Themes:** Sensory sensitivities, sound overwhelm, visual processing, smell sensitivity, touch and clothing sensitivities, interoception, emotional regulation, sensory seeking, ADHD & autism overlap, nervous system regulation

## Overview

This ADHD Women Unite session focused on sensory sensitivities in ADHD women — exploring why sensory overwhelm happens, how it shows up in everyday life, and the practical ways women learn to regulate and cope.

Kath opened the session by sharing emerging research around sensory processing and “sensory gating” in ADHD, explaining how ADHD brains may struggle to filter irrelevant sensory information. This can result in experiences such as sound sensitivity, overwhelm in busy environments, visual discomfort, clothing sensitivities, emotional dysregulation, and difficulty recognising internal body signals such as hunger, thirst and fatigue.

Women shared deeply personal experiences of sensory overwhelm, including distress caused by noise, smells, visual patterns, clothing textures and busy environments. A strong theme throughout the evening was:

“I thought it was just me.”

The session created space for women to feel understood, validated and less alone in experiences that had often been dismissed throughout life as “overreacting” or being “too sensitive.”

## 1. Understanding Sensory Sensitivities in ADHD

The group explored the idea that ADHD brains may process sensory information differently.

Kath shared research around:

- Sensory gating – the brain's ability to filter irrelevant information
- Dopamine and noradrenaline systems – which influence attention and regulation
- Emotional regulation and nervous system arousal

For many ADHD women, it can feel like:  
Everything comes in at once — at full volume.

Rather than filtering background information, women described noticing:

- Conversations happening nearby
- Traffic noise
- Bright lights
- Smells
- Clothing textures
- Visual clutter
- Repetitive movement

all at the same time. This often led to overwhelm, irritability, emotional distress or the need to escape situations.

Kath also discussed how hormonal changes during perimenopause and menopause may intensify sensory experiences for some women.

## 2. Sound Sensitivity & Noise Overwhelm

One of the strongest themes of the evening was sound sensitivity.

Women discussed struggling with:

- Barking dogs
- Multiple people talking at once
- Loud workplaces
- Echoing kitchens and clanging dishes
- Snoring partners
- Chewing sounds
- Certain voice tones
- Sudden or repetitive noises

Several women described hearing:

“Everything all at once.”

rather than being able to filter background sounds.

For some, sound overwhelm caused:

- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Panic
- Headaches
- Exhaustion
- Emotional overwhelm

One member shared how noise cancelling headphones at work had significantly improved their ability to manage a busy kitchen environment, while others discussed using white noise, earplugs and sleep masks to support sleep.

## 3. Visual Sensitivities

Visual overwhelm resonated strongly with many attendees.

Women shared experiences of difficulty with:

- Busy or repetitive patterns
- Bright lighting
- Cluttered environments
- Peripheral movement
- Certain visual combinations or objects feeling deeply distressing

Women described responses such as:

- Panic
- Nausea
- Emotional overwhelm
- Feeling physically uncomfortable
- A strong sense of disgust or revulsion

Discussion highlighted how difficult these experiences can be to explain to people who do not experience them themselves. What may seem “small” externally can feel overwhelming internally.

#### **4. Smell Sensitivity**

Smells emerged as another powerful sensory trigger.

Women discussed:

- Perfume causing headaches
- Cooking smells becoming overwhelming
- Strong environmental smells creating nausea
- Sensitivity to household scents

One attendee described becoming physically sick after overwhelming exposure to lavender scents, despite usually liking lavender in smaller amounts.

This led to discussion around how sensory overwhelm can happen even with things we normally enjoy if the nervous system becomes overloaded.

#### **6. Clothing, Touch & Texture**

Many women strongly related to difficulties with clothing and textures.

Examples included:

- Clothing labels
- Scratchy fabrics
- Tight waistbands
- Certain underwear
- Sticky textures
- Clothing that “just feels wrong”

Several women shared that once they found something comfortable, they repeatedly bought the same item because:

Comfort and predictability mattered.

Others reflected that during periods of stress or emotional overwhelm, sensory sensitivities became even stronger.

## **7. Interoception: Missing Our Body's Signals**

A particularly important discussion centred around interoception — awareness of internal body signals.

This includes recognising:

- Hunger
- Thirst
- Needing the toilet
- Fatigue
- Pain
- Emotional overwhelm

Women recognised experiences such as:

- Forgetting to drink water
- Missing meals
- Delaying going to the toilet
- Ignoring tiredness
- Suddenly feeling emotionally overwhelmed without warning

A powerful conversation emerged around reframing these needs as self-care.

Liz discussed the importance of responding to body signals immediately rather than delaying them, particularly for women who repeatedly “push through” discomfort. This strongly resonated with women who had experienced recurrent dehydration, UTIs or exhaustion from missing bodily signals.

## 7. ADHD, Autism & Sensory Profiles

The group also explored the overlap between ADHD and autism. Liz explained that sensory sensitivities have historically been associated more strongly with autism, but growing evidence increasingly recognises sensory differences in ADHD too.

An important takeaway was:

Sensory profiles are individual.

Some women may struggle with sound but not touch.

Others may seek sensory stimulation while avoiding smells, clothing textures or visual input.

The group discussed the idea that ADHD women may each have their own unique sensory profile, and how understanding these patterns can reduce shame and improve self-support.

### **Strategies & Supports Shared by the Group**

Women generously shared practical strategies that help support their nervous systems.

### **Helpful Supports Mentioned**

- Loop earplugs / earplugs for work, sleep and noisy environments
- Noise cancelling headphones
- White noise for sleep
- Eye masks for light sensitivity
- Soft, predictable clothing
- Movement and walking
- Talking thoughts aloud to process emotions
- DBT (Dialectical Behaviour Therapy) strategies
- Nature and calming environments
- Weighted pressure and comforting textures

The discussion highlighted that regulation looks different for everyone.

## **Key Reflections**

A powerful message emerged throughout the session:  
Sensory sensitivities are not weakness, attention seeking or overreacting.

For many ADHD women:

The nervous system genuinely processes the world differently.  
The evening offered an opportunity for women to recognise themselves in one another's experiences and begin replacing shame with understanding.

As many reflected:

"It isn't just me."

## **References & Further Reading**

Research Discussed

Bijlenga, D. et al. (2017)

Atypical sensory profiles as core features of adult ADHD – research showing adults with ADHD reported significantly higher sensory sensitivity than non-ADHD adults.

Little, L.M. et al.

Research exploring sensory over-responsivity and emotional dysregulation in neurodivergence.

Research into sensory gating suggests ADHD brains may process and filter sensory information differently, helping explain why sounds, movement, textures and visual input can sometimes feel impossible to ignore.

Recommended Reading

Unmasking Autism – helpful for understanding masking, sensory experiences and nervous system differences across neurodivergent people.