

SENSORY PROCESSING DISORDER

“I’m a Sensitive Woman:” ADHD Sensory Overload in Adults

Sensitive women, do you whip off your bra when you get home? Do certain perfumes make you gag? Or does a wrinkle in the sheets drive you nuts? Welcome to the club: adults with sensory processing disorder.

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Many women with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) tell me that the world is full of loud noises, bright lights, and annoying sounds that others filter out easily. Life is chaotic and over-stimulating. Their hypersensitivities make it hard to stay focused and organized.

Meeting the daily demands of a household filled with children takes its toll on a sensitive woman with ADHD, as do workplace chatter and ringing telephones. Even a gentle stroke from a loving partner can feel painful, not pleasurable. Daily living is sometimes a hellish experience.

Sensitive Woman: Anxious and Hypersensitive with ADHD

“Things like ticking clocks, hissing radiators, or noisy heating units in hotels; someone clicking his pen in a library or kicking the back of your seat on an airplane, make sensitive women with ADHD feel assaulted, attacked, or invaded. They get anxious,” says Sari Solden, M.S., an ADHD expert, therapist, and the author of *Women with Attention Deficit Disorder* and *Journeys Through ADDulthood*. Many of her clients are bothered by sounds that others don’t hear.

“I think that many women, and more girls, with ADHD have hypersensitivities,” says Patricia Quinn, M.D., a developmental pediatrician and the author of several books on ADHD.

I counseled a woman with ADHD who had to make her bed before she turned in for the night. She smoothed out all the wrinkles on the sheets, which were painful to her skin. Some women cannot eat a meal with others because “mouth noises” drive them crazy.

[Learn More Here: [Please Don’t Hug Me and More Weird Things that Trigger My ADHD](#)]

Hypersensitivity]

Some women diagnosed with ADHD are also emotionally sensitive. This includes sensitivity to criticism, deep empathy toward others' feelings, and reacting to situations with quick temper out of left field, leaving others hurt and confused.

Researchers are now beginning to understand that many adults with ADHD have these hypersensitivities, or even [Sensory Processing Disorder](#) (SPD) — a neurological condition that doesn't allow for normal processing of stimuli. We see this in children with ADHD, autism, and other disorders, but little is written about adults with SPD.

How do you know if you have SPD and not hypersensitivity? “If you are hypersensitive to the point where it interferes with your functioning, you have SPD,” says Sharon Heller, Ph.D., author of *Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight: What to Do If You Are Sensory Defensive in an Overstimulating World*.

I have ADHD myself, and I struggle with hypersensitivities. Over the years, I have found strategies for saving myself from stress and anxiety. I note my sensitivities and make the needed accommodations. I suggest restaurants on outings with friends, the ones that are quiet and comfortable. I cannot wear high heels, so I've emptied my closet of them. I wear a soft cotton T-shirt under blouses and sweaters to keep harsh fabrics from my skin.

[Symptom Screener: Could You Have Sensory Processing Disorder?]

How do you live in a world that puts you in a state of anxiety, panic, or extreme sadness? Begin by recognizing that [hypersensitivity](#) comes with ADHD. You aren't crazy, and you're not being whiny. Your discomfort and pain are real.

Then identify your sense triggers and find ways to limit their effects. In other words, see things coming and make a plan. If your friend suggests having dinner at a restaurant that has loud live music on Friday nights, suggest another place. Say, “I'd love to go out, but it's hard to hear our conversation over the noise.” Here are some ways to manage a range of sensitivities that many women with ADHD have:

Tactile Challenges for Sensitive Women

- Wear loose-fitting clothing that is tag-free. Some women wear a bathing suit or body suit under their clothes. They find the deep compression calming.
- Choose clothes with natural fibers, like cotton, jersey, silk, or fleece. Try on clothing and move around in it before you purchase it, paying attention to how the fabric moves and feels on your skin.
- Express your intimate needs to your partner. If caressing makes you flinch or causes painful tickling, tell your partner what is better.

- Use makeup and other skin products made for sensitive skin. They are usually less greasy and — bonus — fragrance-free.
- If hugging is uncomfortable to you, offer a handshake and a pat on the shoulder instead.

Sound Challenges for Sensitive Women

- If your workplace is too noisy, and you aren't required to answer the phone or offer customer service, block out the noise with earplugs.
- Use a white noise machine at work.
- Ask for flex time at work, so that you can arrive before others do or stay after they've left. You will have quieter moments.
- Install carpet to buffer footsteps.

Olfactory Challenges for Sensitive Women

- Keep a pot of boiled spices going in the oven. Cinnamon, for instance, makes the house smell pleasant and covers up less offensive smells.
- Purchase fragrance-free cleaning products, deodorants, and skin care products.
- Keep a fragrant sachet in your purse to mask offending odors.
- Wear a lightweight scarf that you can use to cover your nose when shopping or using public transportation.

Visual Challenges for Sensitive Women

- Wear sunglasses — outdoors and indoors, if needed.
- Shop online or at small stores where there is less visual clutter.
- If you must take a trip to the mall or to large, overwhelming stores, take breaks. Find a quiet spot to re-fuel your sensory tank, even if it means going into a bathroom stall for a few minutes.
- Avoid fluorescent lighting, and replace your light bulbs at home and work with full-spectrum lights.

Oral Challenges for Sensitive Women

- Get creative in the kitchen. If you dislike meat or other “chewy” foods, find different ways to prepare them. Make soups and stews that have soft textures. Consider pureeing some foods.
- Use a child-sized toothbrush and toothpaste for sensitive teeth if you're prone to gagging.

- Schedule your dental appointments for later in the day. Gagging reflexes are worse in the morning.
- Chew gum.

Many children with hypersensitivities work with [occupational therapists](#), to help them adjust to a sensory-challenging world. It's harder to find professional help for adults. Visit the SPD Foundation website at www.spdfoundation.net. There you can read more about SPD and search a directory of service providers who work with children and adults. The list includes dentists, doctors, OTs, and psychotherapists. Finding practical strategies for dealing with your hypersensitivities will make the world a lot friendlier.

[[Read This Next: What Is SPD?](#)]

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