

Understanding Autism

Handout 3 - Sensory differences



Many autistic people experience sensory differences

An autistic person may have differences in how they experience noise, visual input, taste, touch, texture and smell. People may also experience their body's internal sensory signals differently.

The human senses



We sense the external world through our taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing.

Proprioception, vestibular and interoception are our body's internal senses.

Proprioception

Is related to our muscles and joints, helping with things like walking, throwing a ball, and applying the right amount of force to pick objects up.

Vestibular

Helps us with our balance.

Interoception

Helps us notice hunger, thirst, internal pain, as well as the physical sensations associated with emotions.

Hyper-sensitivity

Hyper-sensitivity is when a person experiences a sensory input more intensely than people typically do.

People's experiences can include:

- Lighting feeling too bright.
- Noisy and busy environments feeling totally overwhelming, and struggling to filter out background noises during a conversation.
- Finding certain smells or tastes overpowering. Not liking certain food or clothing textures.
- Finding touch uncomfortable, and not liking people being behind them or being too close.
- Getting travel sick, and not liking things like rides and escalators.

Hypo-sensitivity

Hypo-sensitivity is when a person experiences a sensory input less intensely than people typically do.

People's experiences can include:

- Not always noticing when hungry, thirsty, or even in pain.
- Finding it hard to describe symptoms when feeling unwell.
- Finding foods taste bland unless spicy, and not noticing bad smells.
- Seeking more movement than people typically do, and needing this to feel focused and calm.
- Sometimes finding it hard to judge personal space.
- Enjoying visual stimulation like spinning objects.

In 2013 'Hyper or hypo-reactivity to sensory input' was included in the 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' diagnostic criteria for the first time.

Each person will have a different sensory profile

Different people may have hyper or hypo sensitivities with different senses or at different times. When tired, anxious or unwell a person's sensitivities may feel amplified. Some autistic people experience less intense differences than others.



Understanding sensory differences

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Sensory differences can be very specific

For example, it's too simplistic to say "autistic people don't like noise". An autistic person may at times enjoy loud music, but unexpected, unpredictable noises can be incredibly distracting, uncomfortable and even painful.

Sensory differences can be very intense

Some autistic people can find specific smells so overpowering, or bright / busy environments so distracting, it's impossible for them to focus on anything else.

A person may be unaware of their sensory differences

An autistic person will have never experienced their senses in the way that people typically do.

They may struggle in situations they see others coping with, not realising that if others experienced it as they do, they would also feel overwhelmed.

People may not 'get used to things'

If a person has hyper-sensitive hearing they may hear noises others miss. They may always find noisy neighbours hard to live near. Many autistic people are likely to always find busy / noisy environments overwhelming.

Sensory overload

Sensory sensitivities can have a huge impact on people's daily lives, due to having to process extra sensory input, particularly in busy environments.

This can be exhausting, and lead to sensory overload. When overloaded people will need a calm, quiet place to recover in. A darkened room can help to reduce sensory input.

Filtering

Our brain constantly filters out sensory input. We can't be consciously aware of every single thing we see, hear, touch, taste or smell.

Think of this as our internal sound desk. When focusing on a specific conversation our brain tends to 'filter out' background noises.

For many autistic people this filtering doesn't work in quite the same way. This can make it very difficult to keep up with the conversation, to think clearly, and to be able to communicate.

Our individual senses work together to help us make sense of the world

Our brain integrates the messages from all our senses. For example, our vision and hearing work together to help us check for danger when crossing a road. As well as having hypo or hyper sensitivities in certain senses, some autistic people can also experience difficulties with how their senses integrate together.

On a moving train our vestibular sense (balance) and eyes register movement, but our muscles and joints sense our body is still. This can confuse our brain and cause a queasy feeling, particularly when facing away from the direction of travel. Travel sickness can be more likely to happen if you are hyper sensitive in one or more sense. Some autistic people can also find escalators unpleasant.



Enjoying our senses



Sensory experiences are a source of great pleasure for some autistic people with sensory differences.

A person may get intense pleasure from smells, tastes, sounds, lights and touch. A person may enjoy time using a sensory room to explore their senses.

Sensory strategies and support

Reducing sensory input

Noise reducing headphones and earplugs can reduce distractions and help people focus, as can tinted glasses for light sensitivity. Some people avoid very busy environments.

Movement and stimming

Stimming, which includes rocking, fiddling, pacing and repeating words, can help a person reduce sensory overload by blocking out noise and visual information. For some people, stimming is an essential calming strategy, and can also help them to focus on a task or a conversation.

Some people find physical activity helps them stay calm and focused.

Touch and weighted products

Light touch can be alerting (rather like when a fly lands on your hand). Some autistic people cut tags out of clothing. Deep touch can have a calming effect. Some people find weighted blankets soothing.

Our body's internal signals

Some autistic people may struggle to notice they feel hungry or thirsty, and find it helpful to schedule in drink and food breaks. Some people may need support to identify symptoms, pain and even the physical sensations associated with certain emotions.

Occupational therapists often have expertise in sensory differences.

Sensory differences - our experiences



If I need to go to the GP surgery I ask for the last appointment of the day so that the waiting room is quieter. My support worker helps me describe my symptoms as I find this hard.



I carry a bag with my 'sensory toolkit' everywhere I go. It has fidget toys, aromatherapy oils, ear defenders and sunglasses.



I need to move around to help me focus. If I don't move, all my concentration goes on keeping still and I can't focus on what's being said. At college my tutors understand that by fidgeting I'm doing my best to focus on the lesson - if I'm really struggling I'm allowed to go out for a 5 minute run.



I set my laptop screen to warm colours as white can be too intense. In bright environments I wear my tinted glasses.



I find touch, particularly light touch, really alarming. Tags in clothes irritate me, and if someone touches me when I'm not expecting it I freak out - it's like an electric shock.

I can't communicate in busy places as they just overwhelm me. Open plan offices are awful to try to work in!



My personal assistant doesn't wear aftershave on days he visits me as he knows I can't focus when around strong smells.



I play with putty when I really want to focus on listening to a speaker. This helps my brain to block out the distractions.



I wear my deep pressure vest and noise cancelling headphones when I go to an appointment, or on a bus. They help me feel calm and secure. At home I have a weighted blanket. It helps me feel grounded when I'm stressed.



I work in a busy supermarket. If I get a bit overwhelmed I have a 'time out' card I can show my manager. I can then take a short break without needing to explain why.



I don't like having pictures or ornaments in my bedroom. Busy walls feel stressful to me. My bedroom is my sanctuary, and when I feel overwhelmed I go there to escape. I dim the lights and listen to soothing music.

I set reminders at home so that I remember to have a drink, as I don't always notice when I'm thirsty.