



Gwent Integrated Autism Service

Guide to sensory differences and strategies

Sound

Over sensitive - Some people's hearing can be so acute that they can hear things that others cannot such as electricity or people whispering. Sometimes filtering out sounds can be difficult so someone may try to avoid activities or situations where too much noise occurs, as this becomes overwhelming. Avoidance can often be a 'quick fix' coping strategy; avoiding noisy situations completely can limit a person's social life and restrict their independence.

What might help?

- Wearing headphones might help a person to regulate noise (with or without music).
- Finding somewhere quieter to relax and compose yourself.

Under sensitive - Some people may seek out noisy activities or experiences because they are not receiving enough sensory stimulation to feel comfortable, or to concentrate.

What might help?

- Listening to music.
- Playing instruments.
- Hearing/feeling vibrations.
- Singing.
- Activities that can bang or crash.
- TV on in the background.

Vision/Sight

Over sensitive - Bright lights, busy and cluttered spaces, patterns and reflections can be overwhelming or painful. Seeing shapes or cones of light coming from streetlights, cars or other light sources can also occur for some.

What might help?

- Wearing dark glasses or a peaked cap/hat can minimise the glare from lights.
- Give fleeting eye contact or attention to avoid staring at people wearing distracting patterns.
- Driving during the daytime can minimise sensory overload.

- Moving to areas or rooms that are darker can help with bright lights.
- Remove or minimise pictures and tidy your living room and working space for a clutter-free environment.
- Consider using dimmer switches to adjust lighting.
- Avoid strip lighting in the house.
- Plain carpets.
- Plain walls or wallpaper.

Under sensitive - Some people seek out bright or flashing lights, reflections, contrasting and/or vivid colours, or wear colourful clothes.

What might help?

- Engage in arts and crafts using bright colours.
- Fidget spinners.
- Mirrors or other reflective materials.
- Activities that involve water such as swimming.
- Lights or other types of visually stimulating objects such as Lava lamps.

Often Autistic people may have an acute attention to detail and can spot patterns and shapes very clearly and easily. This can be a skill or a distraction.

Difficulty in perceiving depth or seeing visual 'snow' which can become more dense dependent on the time of day can also occur. If you experience any of these, always pay attention to how it impacts on your ability to stay safe in the community particularly when driving.

Touch

Over sensitive - It can be common for everyday activities such as showering to be uncomfortable or even painful. Certain types of clothing, materials, labels or shoes can be uncomfortable to wear. Being touched or hugged by can also feel unpleasant. Being over sensitive to touch can sometimes extend to our mouths which can influence the types of foods that we might eat. Sometimes food textures that are lumpy, course/gritty etc or pop in the mouth can lead to avoiding specific food items or even whole food groups.

What might help?

- Wear baggy or light clothes made from natural materials i.e. cotton.
- Remove labels from clothes.
- Try wearing looser fitting shoes and socks.
- Try wearing lighter shoes such as Crocs, Sketchers or a cheaper alternative.
- Try wearing 'Foot Glove' style shoes (shoes that look and feel like gloves).
- Politely tell family or friends that hugging, high fives or shaking hands can be unpleasant for you. You could either amend these greetings to remain social by giving a light handshake instead of a hug/high five or you could give a 'thumbs up' to avoid touch altogether.
- Explain that deep/heavier touch may be less painful.
- Cooking vegetables or pasta for a longer time so the consistency is a bit softer.
- Blending or mashing some foods into a smoother consistency to get rid of lumps (for example Bolognese/pasta sauces).
- Putting less milk in your breakfast cereal to minimise it from becoming mushy.

Under sensitive - Some people like lots of touch which might come in the form of deep, intense contact or the feeling of being 'grounded' in order to function and to feel comfortable. Chewing and crunching hard foods can provide deep sensory input.

What might help?

- Using a treadmill to walk or run.
- Playing Rugby or similar contact sports.
- Judo or similar martial arts.
- Deep massage.
- Wearing weighted or tight clothes.
- Eating hard fruit/raw vegetables such as carrots or un-ripened apples or pears.
- Cooking vegetables and pasta for a shorter time for a firmer consistency.
- Use non-food items designed for chewing such as 'Chewellery' or similar.

Taste

Over sensitive - A heightened sensitivity to strong flavours and a preference for a more bland diet.

What might help?

- Eating fruit and vegetables that have mild flavours.

- Eating foods such as pasta, bread or rice.
- Eating dairy foods such as Yoghurt, mild cheeses like Cheddar or Edam and Milk.
- Some protein based foods that have mild flavours include Chicken, Quorn (meat substitute), Eggs, white fish (Cod, Plaice and Hake) or Spinach.

Under sensitive - Seeking foods that have strong, spicy, rich, sweet, sour or bitter flavours in order to provide enough sensory feedback.

What might help? You could try introducing the following foods into your diet;

- Curry.
- Mexican food (Chilli, Fajitas, Burritos etc).
- Chilli peppers.
- Foods with lots of Garlic in them (Spaghetti Bolognese, Garlic Bread).
- Sweets (sour, tangy, sharp).
- Citrus fruit in foods and drinks (Oranges, Lemons & Limes).
- Coffee.
- Adding a small amount of sauce to foods to enhance the flavour such as barbeque sauce, ketchup, hot sauces etc.

NB seek advice if you are diabetic or have high blood pressure. Sauces generally contain large amounts of sugar, glucose or fructose syrup and salt.

Smell

Over sensitive - Certain odours can be overpowering often causing nausea. Avoidance can be a common coping strategy but this can have a great impact on everyday life.

What might help?

- Fragrance - free soaps, shower gels etc.
- Inhale through your mouth and exhale through your nose - this can be a temporary, quick fix, long enough for the smell to disappear or for you to move away from the unpleasant odours.
- Sniff smells that you prefer such as Lavender or scented oils on a handkerchief or small canvas bag to mask bad smells.
- Take a break and get some fresh air.
- Explain to your teacher or manager which odours are most disruptive to your learning/ work and see if they can be minimised or removed.

- Ask your teacher or manager if you can study/work elsewhere in the room or building if smells cannot be avoided.

Under sensitive - Someone may have difficulty or an inability to detect smells and may seek strong or specific odours, possibly in the types of food eaten or things that give comfort such as the smells of familiar buildings, places or people.

What might help?

- Use a preferred perfume, aftershave, shower gels or soaps.
- Sniff smells that you prefer such as Lavender, scented oils or perfumes/aftershaves on a handkerchief or in a small canvas bag.
- Cook or prepare foods that have pleasant aromas.
- Eat foods that have pleasant aromas.

Spatial awareness (Proprioception)

The receptors for this system are mainly found in our joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments. When we move, we stimulate our Proprioceptive system; this is the system that provides our brains with information about where our limbs and bodies are in space and what they are doing. Problems with this system can result in stiff, uncoordinated, clumsy movements, holding things too tightly or too loosely or grinding teeth. Exercises that involve pushing, pulling or stretching can help regulate someone's proprioceptive system and enable them to feel 'grounded' and more calm.

What might help?

- Rolling out pastry, kneading bread dough.
- Going for a walk up a hill or using a treadmill at an incline of approximately 4%.
- Carrying a weighted backpack.
- Lifting, pushing or pulling weights at the gym.
- Doing gardening (digging, raking etc).
- Doing pushups - both on the floor and standing up against a wall.
- Sitting on a chair and doing 'chair pushups'.
- Doing Yoga or Tai Chi to do controlled stretching movements.
- Any sport or activity involving pushing, pulling, weight bearing.

Proprioception makes it possible for us to as pick up objects, catch a ball or activities that require the use of more than one limb such as riding a bike. Difficulties with

proprioception might affect activities that involve motor skills and coordination such as playing sports, riding a bike, writing, walking up or down stairs or judging distances.

What might help?

- Amend the task - can you change the way in which you do the activity? Instead of using a bike with pedals, buy one that has an added electric motor to minimize the amount of pedaling required.
- Adapt the environment - change things around to make the activity easier. Clear clutter or obstructions in the house or work environment to minimize bumping into things or knocking things over.
- Aids or adaptations to make the task easier - a lift instead of the stairs, using adaptations to improve functioning such as ergonomic pens/pencils to improve writing, a kettle tipper for difficulties with depth perception or consider replacing china cups or plates with plastic ones.

Movement and balance (Vestibular)

This is the sense that lets us know when we or our surroundings are moving. Our brains receive messages from tiny receptors inside our ears and these messages enable us to co-ordinate the movements of our eyes, head and body and tells us about balance, movement and gravity. Additional information from our sense of spatial awareness (proprioceptive system) helps us to process movement and balance and enables our body to respond to movement accordingly.

Over sensitive - Receiving too much sensory information meaning certain movements can cause nausea, or feeling fear or anxiety. The types of activities that can cause sensory overload could include;

- Travelling in a car or bus.
- Travelling on a plane.
- Walking up or down stairs.
- Going up or down in a lift.
- Running/taking part in sports.
- Going on fairground rides.
- Anything that makes your body move suddenly.

What might help?

Avoid situations that cause too much movement can restrict independence and enjoyment in everyday life. Trying to build up tolerance to situations that cause movement can help.

- Sitting in a rocking chair and rocking gently.
- Doing Tai Chi or Yoga.
- Gently swinging in a hammock.
- Swaying or slowly dancing/moving to music.
- Sitting on an exercise ball and rocking or bouncing gently.
- Swimming.
- Shorter car or bus journeys - gradually building up.
- Take anti sickness medication.

Under sensitive - The brain's of people who are under sensitive have difficulty receiving signals from normal movements and therefore require more movement to feel calm and alert. Individuals who are under sensitive may fidget, bounce, rock, spin, run, climb or generally have difficulty sitting still. Short movement breaks can often help with concentration at school, college, university, work or at home.

What might help?

- Walking.
- Running.
- Jogging or jogging on the spot.
- Riding a bike.
- Sitting in a rocking chair.
- Trampolining.
- Riding on a swing.
- Using a skipping rope.
- Gymnastics.
- Playing sports such as badminton or football.

NB Vestibular activities need to be undertaken with caution as it is easy to become 'over' stimulated.

How your body feels (Interoception)

Interoception is a sense that helps us understand and feel what's going on inside our bodies from receptors located inside our organs, muscles, bones and skin. This may lead to problems recognising hunger or being full, heat or cold, thirst, pain, sexual arousal, anxiety or needing to use the toilet.

Interoception can also affect emotions causing issues with recognising the signs of nervousness, upset or fear until it is too late to do anything about it. Emotions such as anxiety, anger, happiness, sadness or fear causes the body to behave differently;

- The heart beats faster.
- The muscles may become tighter or shaky.
- Sweating could increase.
- Breathing becomes deeper, faster or shallower.
- Perhaps develop a strange feeling in the stomach; a bit fluttery or tight.
- Perhaps a need to use the toilet.
- A dry mouth.
- May feel like we have had a sudden boost of energy.

Some Autistic people may experience a delay, reduction or lack of these sensations affecting the ability to identify how they may be feeling.

What might help?

- A visual body map and some checking questions to establish the area where pain and illness is situated, how this makes the person feel and what they can see (needs to be tailored to an individual's learning style). In addition to this a plan of what to do i.e. stay at home, visit the GP or go to the hospital would be appropriate.
- Routines or alarms for using the toilet.
- Using an alarm or a visual schedule to remind when to eat.
- Regular alarms throughout the day or a visual schedule to remind when to drink.
- A visual schedule to indicate what types of clothes to wear when it is hot or cold.
- A checklist of what bodies physically do when feeling certain emotions and how to regulate or calm the emotions or feelings as needed.