

**Along with difficulties in communication, social interaction and rigidity of thought, many people on the autism spectrum also experience sensory issues. This information sheet gives an introduction to these issues and how to support an autistic person with sensory issues.**

For non-autistic people, it is hard to understand the impact of sensory issues on the lives of people with autism. Each autistic person is affected differently, so it is almost impossible to predict exactly how sensory issues will impact on a specific person.

We all experience the world through our senses and our brains interpret the sensations for us so that we can make sense of our experiences and take appropriate action (for example we feel cold so we put on a jumper). Because we experience many sensations at once, our brains have a filter system that helps us to pay attention only to what is most important and relevant at the time. This filter system may not work in the same way in autistic people.

Autistic people can be either hypo- (under) or hyper- (over) sensitive to any of their senses. The experience will be different for each person, and their own sensory issues may vary depending on the day, stress and anxiety levels.

Overloading of the senses can lead to meltdown or shutdown if sensory overload is sufficiently high. Keep a record of these events, with details of what went before to try and work out the trigger.

## The Senses

<b>Vision</b>	Some autistic people have an excellent eye for detail, and may see patterns, colours and forms that others do not see. This can be an asset, but it can also be distracting.
<b>Hearing</b>	Some autistic people find the pitch of certain sounds painful or notice the low hum of electrical equipment nobody else hears. They may find it hard to cope with being in a noisy environment. Others may like to have music on very loud, or enjoy loud banging.
<b>Smell</b>	Some autistic people may find it difficult to cope with strong smells like perfume and deodorant. They may find it difficult to access environments like public toilets and restaurants. Others may seek out strong smells.

<b>Touch</b>	<p>Some autistic people do not like to be touched. They may not be able to cope with the feel of certain fabrics, or labels in clothing. Others may enjoy pressure, so may like to wear tight or heavy clothing. Autistic people may experience heat, cold and pain differently.</p>
<b>Taste</b>	<p>Some autistic people have very limited diets, due to having particular preference for certain textures and bland food. Others may seek out strong flavours like spicy food (these people are under-sensitive to taste).</p>
<b>Proprioception</b>	<p>This is our body awareness sense and is the way we know where our bodies are in relation to other objects and space. We get these messages through our muscles and joints. Some autistic people may be clumsy, drop things, bump into things or they may seek out input by jumping, banging, biting.</p>
<b>Vestibular</b>	<p>This is our sense of balance and movement and is sensed by our inner ear. Autistic people may seek out this sensation by spinning, flapping, unusual body positions or they may find some movements unbearable and may experience forms of motion sickness.</p>
<b>Interoception</b>	<p>This sense helps you understand and feel what's going on inside your body. Internal receptors receive signals and send information to the brain. Autistic people who lack awareness of these signals may find it difficult to recognise when they feel hungry, full, hot, cold or thirsty and needing the toilet.</p>

## Strategies to support autistic people with sensory issues

- Be aware of each person's sensory issues and adapt your approach. Completing a sensory profile can help. AWM have a toolkit you can purchase from <https://shop.autismwestmidlands.org.uk>
- Keep things simple to avoid over-stimulation.
- Modify the environment to suit the person's sensory needs if possible. For example you could avoid fluorescent lighting and replace it with subdued lighting, spotlights and uplighters; introduce carpets, curtains and soft furnishings to large rooms to muffle harsh sounds and echoes; and use screens or partitions to divide up large rooms.
- If it is necessary for an autistic person to de-sensitise themselves to a particular sensory issue, introduce this very gradually, always keeping the person's wellbeing as a top priority.

- Provide different textures to handle or apply light touch followed by firm pressure for tactile seekers.
- Use weighted jackets and blankets for short periods of time for autistic people who seek pressure.
- Give items to mouth, suck, bite, blow and chew and opportunities for pushing, pulling, carrying and jumping.
- Provide opportunities for rhythmical movement – jogging, swimming, trampolining, climbing, dancing.
- If certain behaviour seems unexplainable, look at the person's sensory profile and ask yourself what they could be getting from the behaviour.
- Provide visual supports to back up verbal information e.g. picture/photo cards. These can also be used to prepare a person or be used by the autistic person to communicate a difficulty with the sensory environment.

## Useful resources

There are lots of free resources on the internet. The following websites are only a few of many that are available.

<http://sensory-processing.middletownautism.com/>

<https://www.sensorysmarts.com/>

The following websites sell sensory toys and equipment.

[www.cheapdisabilityaids.co.uk](http://www.cheapdisabilityaids.co.uk)

[www.sensorytoywarehouse.com](http://www.sensorytoywarehouse.com)

[www.specialneedstoys.com](http://www.specialneedstoys.com)

[www.rompa.com](http://www.rompa.com)

[www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com)

## Sensory profile

A sensory profile checklist and supporting material for parents of children with autism can be purchased on the Autism West Midlands eShop:

<https://shop.autismwestmidlands.org.uk>