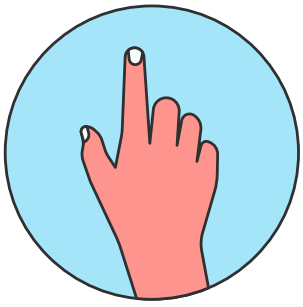
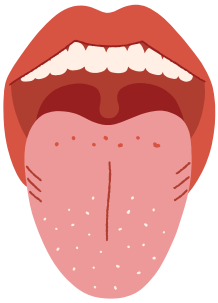
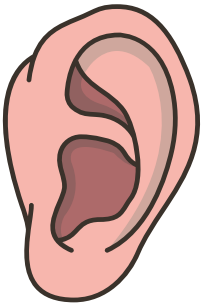
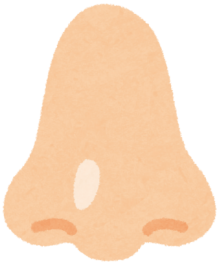
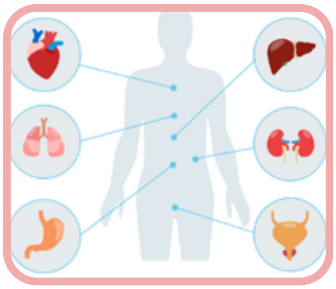
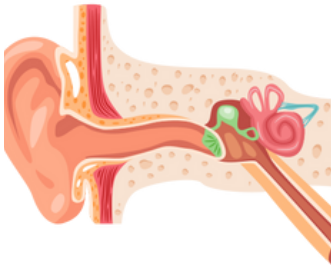
Sensory Preferences and Differences

These guidelines contain general information to support people who experience sensory sensitivities with their personal care. They are not intended to replace individualised occupational therapy assessment and advice.

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SENSORY PREFERENCES & DIFFERENCES

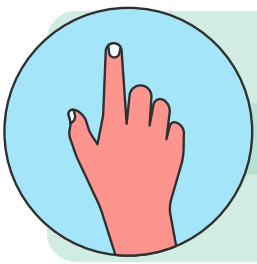
"Sensory experiences for me can be intense, overwhelming, or delightful. Understanding and accommodating my sensory needs matter." - Anonymous

Well-known senses in our body

Sight (Visual)

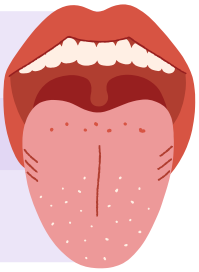
Hearing (Auditory)

Smell (Olfactory)



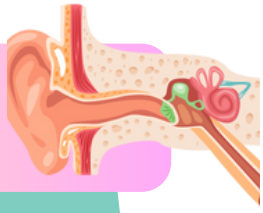
Touch (Tactile)

Taste (Gustatory)



Additional senses, which are less well-known:

Movement and Balance (Vestibular)

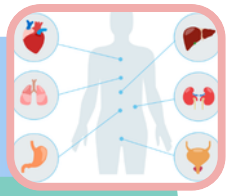


This is the information we get from sensory receptors in our inner ear.

Body awareness (Proprioception)

This is the information we get from sensory receptors in our muscles and joints that tells us about our body position, force of movement and pressure.

Internal body signals (Interoception)



This is the information we get from our internal organs and tissues that tells us about our physical and emotional states e.g. hunger, thirst, pain, anxiety.

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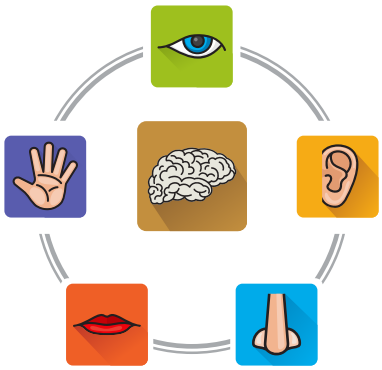
SENSORY PREFERENCES & DIFFERENCES



Everyone has unique preferences and responses to sensory stimuli within the environment. Some people may be more sensitive than others to certain stimuli e.g. smells, sounds or movement. Some people may seek out or need more stimuli e.g. touch, movement or smell.

Our bodies are constantly sorting sensory information. Some people experience differences in how their bodies process this information and this can impact on their functioning in their daily lives. Sometimes it can feel like the information that they get is not enough, other times it can feel scrambled or makes a person feel overloaded. Getting the right amount of sensory information helps the person to function in their environment.

Patterns around sensory preferences and differences can sometimes indicate that a person is 'over-sensitive' or 'under-sensitive' to the sensory information their body receives from the world around them.

Signs of over-sensitivity to sensory input:

- Avoids certain sensory input or reacts defensively against it.
- Easily becomes overstimulated and displays a stress response.
- Uncomfortable around certain sensations and may become withdrawn and appears to shut down from what's happening around them.

Signs of under-sensitivity to sensory input:

- Slower to register sensory information, or appears tired/passive.
- Might seek out sensory input e.g. always on the go, touching everything in their path.

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Visual (Sight)

"Intensely preoccupied with the movement of the spinning coin or lid, I saw nothing. People around me were transparent and no sound intruded on my fixation. It was as if I was deaf"
Dr Temple Grandin

What impact can this have?

Sensitivity

- Distracted by too much visual stimuli.
- Appears uncomfortable in strong sunlight.
- Sensitive to bright lights.
- Covers eyes, squints, prefers to be in the dark.

Seeking

- Seeks out bright, reflective or spinning objects, lights.
- Stares intensely at objects/people.

What might help?

Sensitivity

- Dim or reduce lighting, reduce fluorescent lighting, use incandescent or LED lighting, use dimmer switches, mood lighting.
- Sunglasses.
- Peaked caps, sun hats.
- Blackout blinds, car blinds.
- Reduce visual clutter. Create a clutter free environment.
- Use colour contrast to support visual attention.

Seeking

- Increase opportunities and access to visual items with visually appealing and stimulating patterns, e.g. spin wheels, mirrors, lava lamps, projectors, kaleidoscopes.
- Position people in spaces where they can watch others and activities easily.

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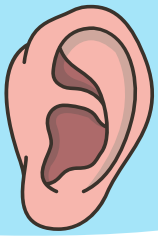
Sound (Auditory)



"Sudden loud noises hurt my ears like a dentist's drill hitting a nerve. High pitched continuous noises such as hair dryers and other small motors are annoying. All the behaviour modification in the world is not going to stop a child with [sensory needs] from screaming when a noise hurts his ears."
Dr Temple Grandin

What impact can this have?

Sensitivity

- Sensitive to loud sounds.
- Cannot tolerate noisy busy environments.
- Seeks out quiet spaces.
- Covers ears.
- Constantly makes noise to block out other sounds.
- Easily distracted by sound.
- Irritated by sounds not usually bothersome to others, such as lights buzzing or paper rustling.
- Cannot tolerate background noises that are seemingly irrelevant, leading to discomfort or distress e.g. hum of a fridge, background radio, clocks ticking, people chewing.

Seeking

- Fascinated by certain sounds.
- Likes making vocal noise in locations where sound is amplified or there is an echo.
- Bangs doors or objects to make loud noise.

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What might help?

Sensitivity

- Reduce background noise where possible e.g. turn off radio/TV, turn phone volume down or put it on vibrate, close doors/ windows.
- Trial other sounds/music to mask background noise, if required e.g. relaxation/ preferred music or other sounds like white noise.
- Access to a quiet place to avoid a build-up of stress/overstimulation.
- Warn in advance of loud sounds e.g. blender, vacuum, fire alarm, hair dryer, hand dryer. Name the source of the noise as soon as possible.
- Support the person to have control over the source of the sound where possible e.g. ask them to turn on/off appliances like vacuum cleaners, blender, music/radio/TV, hair dryer.
- Add soft furnishings to the environment to absorb noise e.g. carpet on hard floors, curtains, cushions, felt sliders on chairs.
- Avoid busy times for activities/locations e.g. arrive later or earlier.
- Consider other options for managing sound e.g. wearing a hood, hat or headband, noise protection ear plugs or headphones. Play preferred music through headphones to support visits to noisy or crowded places.

Seeking

- Increase opportunities and access to enjoyable auditory input e.g. preferred music, audio books, photo frames, talking tiles, rain makers.
- Listening to nature sounds, rhythmic songs similar to heart beat rhythm or 432 Hertz songs can help calm the nervous system.

What might help?

Additional supports:

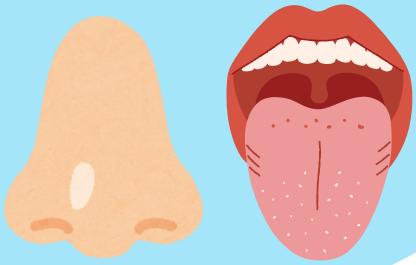
- Use visuals such as pictures/images/objects to support understanding and processing of verbal instruction.
- Gain the person's attention before giving instruction, wait until they are looking at you.
- Carry out proprioceptive activities prior to exposure to uncomfortable sounds to help reduce sensitivity and support the processing of auditory information (See handout on proprioceptive activities).

Think & Do:

Stop where you are, close your eyes, and listen to everything around you for 10 seconds.

- What do you notice?
- How aware are you of every sound?
- Is there anything that you can do to reduce the noise in the environment?

Smell (Olfactory) & Taste (Gustatory)



"I was supersensitive to the texture of food and I had to touch everything with my fingers to see how it felt before I could put it in my mouth. I really hated it when the food had things mixed with it. I could never put any of it into my mouth. I knew if I did I would get sick"
Sean Barron

What impact can this have?

Sensitivity:

- Certain smells and tastes might be intense and overpowering.
- Poor tolerance of distinct smells e.g. perfumes, shampoos, candles, washing powders, cooking smells, air fresheners.
- Gag easily in response to certain food and smells.
- Dislikes certain environments because of the smells e.g. passing fish/meat counter, perfume counters, candle aisle.
- Eats only bland tasting foods.

Seeking:

- Seeking to constantly have something in their mouth e.g. eating/drinking excessively. This might include materials which are non-edible.
- Seeks out strong tastes and flavours, or extreme temperatures e.g. hot curries, ice cubes, frozen foods, hot drinks, toothpaste.
- Excessive need to smell items or people.
- Does not seem to notice extreme odours. This might include their own body odour.

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What might help?

Sensitivity:

- Reduce/avoid strong smells where possible. Use fragrance free soaps, shower gels, deodorants, cleaning products and avoid excessive use of perfume/cologne.
- Respect sensory preferences around foods and smells.
- Provide opportunity to interact with new food without any pressure to taste it.
- Open windows or use an extractor fans when cooking.
- Eat in a separate room from where the food is cooked.

Seeking:

- Stimulate the sense of taste and smell through adding spices, herbs to food, bitter tastes-lemons, grapefruit, sweet and sour tastes, frozen fruits, drinks, ice cubes, ice-lollies.
- Offer crunchy food e.g. carrots, celery sticks, cucumber.
- Offer safe chewy items if suitable e.g. chewy tubes, chewy jewellery, chewing gum.

Additional Note:

- It can be helpful to offer scents that are familiar, calming or comforting before or during a stressful activity to induce a sense of calm.
- Scents can also be used to prepare a person for an activity by associating a certain smell with a location or activity e.g. cinnamon to cue that it is time to do some baking, smelling shower gel prior to showering.

Movement and Balance (Vestibular)

"I am calming myself. My senses are so disconnected, I lose my body. So I flap (my hands). If I don't do this, I feel scattered and anxious....I hardly realised that I had a body... I needed constant movement, which made me get the feeling of my body" - Tito

What impact can this have?

Sensitivity:

- Car sickness or motion sickness.
- Fear or anxiety using escalators, lifts and stairs.
- Avoidance or stress response with activities where the head is not upright e.g. tilting head back for hair washing.
- Feel unstable when feet are off the ground e.g. being hoisted, on a swing, on a high stool.
- Avoidance of activities that use whole body movements e.g. sports and certain physical activities.
- Tends to tense their body if moved unexpectedly.
- Avoidance or fear of walking on unstable surfaces e.g. sand and uneven terrain.

Seeking:

- Seeking out lots of movement e.g. pacing.
- Rocking, swinging or spinning.
- Frequently needs to move their whole body when engaging in an activity, or may find it difficult to sit for long periods.

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What might help?

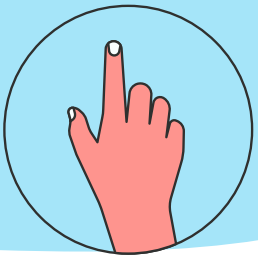
Sensitivity:

- Accessible, level access environment.
- Consult with GP or pharmacist around options to address motion sickness if required.
- Give prior warning to changes in surfaces. Avoid uneven surfaces if possible.
- Avoid activities requiring fast sudden movements. Slow gentle movements are more easily tolerated.
- Break activities into smaller steps.
- Use of visual cues to help the person navigate their environment e.g. tape on the floor, coloured tiles, colour contrasts between floor/walls and walls/doorways.
- Consider ways to stabilise the body better e.g. with appropriate seating to support any vestibular or balance difficulties. Ensure feet are on the ground or supported.

Seeking:

- Provide an appropriate space for a person who uses movement to calm themselves e.g. safe outdoor space, clear hallway, clutter-free room or area in the home.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for safe movement throughout the day e.g. walks, swimming, adult outdoor equipment, gym, swings, trampolines etc.
- Offer alternatives to sitting such as bean bags, gym ball, Move n'Sit cushion or other equipment that can offer opportunities for movement.

Touch (Tactile)



"I pulled away when people tried to hug me, because being touched sent an over-whelming tidal wave of stimulation through my body...when noise and sensory over-stimulation became too intense, I was able to shut off my hearing and retreat into my own world"
Dr Temple Grandin

What impact can this have?

Sensitivity:

- Uncomfortable with being touched unexpectedly and may avoid this.
- Strong dislike for having substances on their hands e.g. avoids cooking.
- Difficulties with brushing or washing hair, or cutting nails.
- Finds some food textures unpleasant.
- Tolerates only certain fabrics or textures.
- Finds crowded areas very difficult.

Seeking:

- Constantly seeks to touch items and people, trails hands along walls when walking, touches everything, constantly fidgets with items.
- Craves or seeks out pressure on their bodies e.g. hugs, squeezes.
- Seeks out hot or cold temperatures.
- Unusually high pain threshold, doesn't respond when hurt.
- Bumps, presses or leans their body intentionally against objects or people.

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What might help?

Sensitivity:

- Refer to personal care document to address sensory sensitivities in personal care tasks.
- Approach the person from the front. Do not touch unexpectedly.
- Try to position the person where there are less people in their space.
- Respect tactile sensory preferences e.g. cut off labels/tags from clothing, wear gloves during cleaning chores, choose less busy times for community activities.
- Have fidget/tactile items of interest available to the person to support regulation during stressful or non-preferred activities.
- Provide opportunity for calming deep pressure touch and proprioceptive activities (See handout on proprioceptive activities).

Seeking:

- Provide opportunities for tactile exploration through functional and leisure-based activities, e.g. gardening, social farming, swimming, washing windows/dishes, clay modelling.
- Provide access to a variety of tactile items e.g. fidget items, squeeze balls, different textures, kinetic sand, textured swatches/materials.
- Provide opportunity for calming deep pressure touch and proprioceptive activities (See handout on proprioceptive activities).

Body Awareness (Proprioception)

"I often feel like my body is disjointed or scattered. Engaging in activities that provide proprioceptive input, like running or flapping, helps me feel more connected and grounded" T. Mukhopadhyay

What impact can this have?

- Standing too close to others or might not be aware of personal space.
- Frequently bumping into people, things or obstacles while navigating through spaces e.g. door frames.
- May not appear to be aware of their own strength, or use extra force when this isn't required e.g. with plates, cups, doors, drawers.
- Seeks additional sensory input to their bodies e.g. constantly moving, tapping, banging, pressing specific body parts.

What might help?

- Use of weighted items while moving to increase body awareness e.g. weighted backpack.
- Use push-pull activities with resistance and proprioceptive /heavy work activities e.g. pulling laundry from washing machine, carrying heavy items. See handout on proprioceptive activities.
- Encourage whole-body movements where body weight is being used e.g. swimming, gym, cycling.

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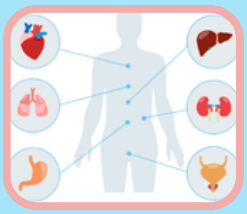
Internal body signals (Interoception)



"Without interoception awareness, it's like hiking in the mountains without a map and compass. Without good interoception awareness, we struggle to know what our body needs from moment to moment, making it hard to care for and comfort our bodies in ways that help us self-regulate and self-soothe." - Dr. Megan Anna Neff

What impact can this have?

- A high or low pain tolerance.
- Finds it hard to detect where pain is.
- Difficulty recognising physiological states such as, hunger/satiation, tiredness, illness, thirst, need for the toilet.
- Difficulty differentiating between emotional states e.g. anxiety, boredom.
- Differences in body temperature regulation.

What might help?

- Creating routines arounds food, drinks, toileting and movement breaks e.g. reminder to use the bathroom before going out.
- Checking in with the person regularly e.g. offering a drink of water, prompting to remove jacket or jumper if they appear too hot.
- Recognising and addressing when someone may be in pain e.g. menstruation, tooth ache, constipation.
- Model your own feelings e.g. my tummy is rumbling I think I might need to eat.

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