

What are Sensory Needs or 'Sensory Processing Difficulties'?

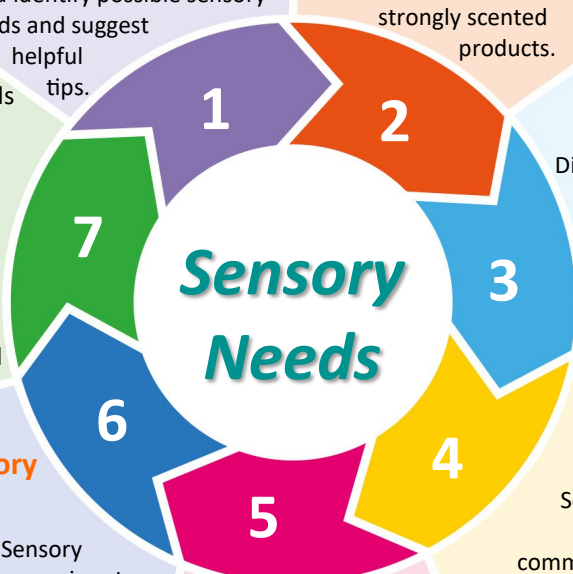
Our senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and spatial awareness) tell us about our environment. Our senses receive information from both inside and outside of our bodies. Sensory processing refers to how our senses work together to organise and process incoming information from the world around us. The central nervous system controls our sensory system. When our sensory system works together it allows us to interact with the environment in purposeful and meaningful ways. Whether we are biting an apple or riding a bicycle, our successful completion of the activity requires processing sensation or 'sensory integration'. People with sensory processing difficulties may be over-sensitive (hypersensitive) or under-sensitive (hyposensitive) in some or all senses. People with a single or dual sensory impairment have to process things differently for example, how they access information, communication and mobility. People who struggle to deal with all this information are likely to become stressed or anxious and possibly feel physical pain, resulting in behaviours that may not seem linked to

Further Information and Resources

This 7-Minute Briefing provides a basic summary of sensory needs and steps to consider to support adults. There are many extensive guidance and support resources available in relation to sensory needs via [Autism Speaks](#), [Multi-Sensory World](#), [National Autistic Society](#), [The Seashell Trust](#), and [Beyond Autism](#). In addition, support and guidance in relation to sensory impairments is available via the [NHS](#), [Royal National Institute of Blind People](#), [DeafBlind UK](#), [Royal National Institute for Deaf People](#), [British Deaf Association](#), [Sense](#), and [Action Deafness](#). Local support is available via the Oldham Council [Sensory Team](#) and [Henshaws](#).

Managing Sensory Overload

Everyone feels overwhelmed from time to time. Sensory overload occurs when the brain receives more sensory input than it can process. Sensory overload is when any of the senses are overstimulated. This can be triggered by an abundance of background noise or a single event, like an unexpected loud noise, or it can build up over time due to the effort it takes to cope with sensory sensitivities. Physical reactions can include rapid heart rate, difficulty breathing, light-headedness, agitation or irritability, sweating, headaches, stomach aches, panic, insomnia, or nausea. Emotional reactions may include anxiety, fear, fight or flight reactions, irritability or aggression. When arranging face to face interactions with a person that may experience sensory overload, practitioners should be mindful of the environment and make small changes that will support the person and avoid distractions. An example would be adjusting and adapting the way you communicate to avoid simple misunderstandings. Identifying coping mechanisms that work for the person will put them back in control. When a person is experiencing sensory overload, practitioners can let them know there is nothing wrong with them taking regular breaks or removing themselves from the situation to cut down the stimulation their brain is dealing with. Simple calming techniques like counting to ten and concentrated breathing may help to calm things down straight away. There are therapies available to treat sensory overload in adults. Involvement of an occupational therapist can be beneficial.



Sensory Needs

Reasonable Adjustments

The [Equality Act](#) states all organisations must take steps to remove barriers people face due to disability. This includes those with sensory needs. The [British Sign Language Act](#) states all public services and information must be accessible. The [Care Act](#) states that accessible services must be provided for Deafblind service users. Reasonable adjustments are changes that should be considered to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to a person's needs such as finding a different way to do something or providing equipment. They are specific to each person. All practitioners should consider if reasonable adjustments are required to support adults to engage in practice. Some examples include choosing the best time for an appointment; keeping the environment calm; using clear speech; using open and closed questions correctly; introducing yourself and others; using weighted blankets to help reduce anxiety; avoiding activities such as escalators or car journeys if a person is over sensitive to movement or balance. It is important that the person feels empowered.

Website: www.oldhamsafeguarding.org

Email: OldhamSafeguardingAdultsBoard@Oldham.gov.uk

Environmental Factors

The environment can have a major impact on how a person manages their sensory needs. Good contrast, good lighting, lack of clutter, and sound levels all play a part in reducing difficulties. Many people state they can see types of lights flickering or hear them hum which can be very distracting or possibly even painful, others may struggle with bright lighting and require specialist glasses or a reduced echo room. Due to these difficulties, it is best to use adjustable lighting or to turn fluorescent lights off in rooms wherever possible. Complex patterns on floors, walls or window blinds can be distracting. Certain background sounds, which other people ignore or block out, can be unbearably loud or distracting and can affect a person's ability to concentrate. Noisy environments can result in difficulties with processing both auditory and visual information simultaneously resulting in some people being over stimulated and overwhelmed. Consider using noise reducing head/ear phones and keeping noise disruptions minimal. Be aware that only one person should speak at a time to allow the person to absorb and process. Some people can become overwhelmed by subtle smells such as the smells of fabrics, cleaning products, air fresheners, perfumes, or deodorants; consider avoiding or removing strongly scented products.

Distractions

Some people may be distracted by patterns or objects that other people miss, such as fluff on floor; lights; smells; or cluttered spaces (these can also cause issues with mobility). Ensure there are alert systems in place to inform people of what is happening such as sudden noises like alarms. Distractions may lead to difficulty focusing, fatigue and withdrawal. Be patient and positive. Consider using positive reinforcement to recognise and praise people for their efforts. Large tasks can be overwhelming for people; consider breaking tasks into smaller steps. If you feel that the person is being distracted, consider offering a break.

Sensory Impairments

Sensory impairment is a loss of normal function in one or more of the senses, but the term is most commonly used to mean the loss of sight, hearing or a combination of both: Dual Sensory Impairment (DSI), this does not have to be a total loss of the sense. Sensory impairments are often overlooked and invisible health conditions. Deafblind is an umbrella term however it is only applicable when there are difficulties with communication, mobility and accessing information. It can affect how a person interacts with their environment. Supporting a person with a sensory impairment varies for each person depending on the severity of the impairment. Always ask the person how it is best to communicate with them. You may need to consider a British Sign Language interpreter, hands on British Sign Language or Deafblind Manual, which are other methods of communication. This conversation should happen at the initial point of contact. When meeting with a person with a visual impairment you may need to keep them informed about people moving around the room/table and say their name to ensure that they know when you are speaking directly to them if there are more than the two of you in a room.

