

The world can be a loud, busy place and while we will never be able to fully avoid sensory overload, understanding your own personal sensory needs can help deal with it. Autistic people tend to process sensory information differently to non-autistic people. Sometimes lights can feel brighter, sounds louder, or clothes may feel uncomfortable to some of us. Even amongst individual autistic people, we will process sensory information differently – one autistic person may love flashing colourful lights, where another autistic person may find them overwhelming, for example.

It is important to know that everyone processes their senses differently and that there is no one 'right' way to experience the world around you. By developing knowledge of how your own body processes sensory information, you can take steps to avoid reaching the point of sensory overload and minimise the risks of meltdowns or shutdowns.

Some things we experience through our senses can be difficult or overwhelming, but others can be much more enjoyable, stimulating, or soothing. Knowing which sensations you find difficult and which you enjoy can help you find a balance. We call this mix a 'sensory diet', and just like our nutritional diet, a balanced sensory diet is important.

To learn more about your own sensory needs, it's helpful to think about each sense individually. Senses include:

Taste

Touch

Smell

Sound

Sight

Vestibular (movement and balance)

Proprioception (this is your awareness of your body in relation to what's around you - examples include judging the distance or speed of people or objects approaching or moving away from you, judging the force of your own movements and hand-eye coordination)

For each sense, try and answer the following questions. It may be difficult to answer everything at once, sometimes we don't recognise or remember how a sense affects us until we experience it again. It can be helpful to revisit these questions occasionally and add in anything new you have remembered. Be mindful as well that your sensory needs and preferences can change over the course of your lifetime, especially when going through hormonal changes such as puberty or pregnancy.

- What makes you uncomfortable, irritable, or makes it hard to focus?
- Are there things you feel sensitive to? Maybe you can hear high pitched noises or notice visual patterns others don't pick up on
- Are there things you feel don't affect you as much as they do other people? For example, is it difficult to notice smells others find strong?
- What sensations do you enjoy or find stimulating?
- Are there things you do to seek out positive stimulation? Do you like to spin on a chair or eat very spicy food, for example?
- What sensations are soothing or make you feel calm?

If you're struggling, you can look at the example sheet for ideas.

These are just some questions to start you off. As you think about one sensation, you will be likely to think of others. Our sensations are linked. When you think about your favourite food, you are not only thinking about the taste - the texture and smell will be important to you too. Maybe you enjoy the way the food looks on your plate, or the sound it makes as you eat.

You can use this as another way to learn about your sensory profile. Think of something you like or dislike. It could be absolutely anything. Then, make a list of all the sensations involved. Does one sensation you enjoyed in your example apply to something else?

While we can't prevent sensory overload, there are many sensory difficulties that will have solutions. By noticing the connections and commonalities between your sensory difficulties, you are better equipped to find strategies for dealing with difficult situations.

To use one example:

You realise that bright lights are a problem in several different situations: sunlight, fluorescent lights indoors, car headlights at night.

These three situations can be three distinct problems, but by grouping them together we can experiment with some solutions. It may seem obvious that wearing sunglasses will help dim sunlight, but less so wearing them indoors, and even less so wearing them at night when bright car headlights can be a problem – by grouping them together, not only do commonalities in difficulties become clearer, but so too do possible solutions.

Finding effective coping strategies will require some experimentation. Sometimes some strategies might work better than others due to a variety of factors including tiredness, stress etc, so having a bank of different strategies you can implement can be useful. For example, as well as wearing sunglasses to help deal with glaring lights, you can also use hats at times instead.

Keep track of what you've tried, and be sure to note down the things that have worked well. Sometimes making small adjustments to potential solutions can help too. Nobody gets every solution right straight away, and it can help to talk with other autistic people about what supports they use to support their sensory differences.

Using sensory profile can help you and those who support you. Regularly reviewing together is helpful. Others may notice strategies you've been using without even realising it.