

Autistic Sensory Differences

What are they?

Autistic people experience the sensory world very differently from non-Autistic people. One Autistic person might be hyper-sensitive to certain sensory experiences, and do whatever to avoid them, whereas another might be hypo-sensitive and crave heavy sensory input (or both/a mix). Sensory differences include the main 5 senses:

Sight

Sound

Touch

Smell

Taste

In addition to 3 lesser-known senses:

Interoception

Movement

Balance

SIGHT: A person might struggle with intense eye contact, bright lights, a chaotic mix of colours or a lack of visuals for support. Another might seek out loud colours, lots of lighting or certain visuals (e.g. shiny things).

What might help:

- Sunglasses to block out light
- Reducing eye contact
- Using visual prompts such as labels/lists
- Using calm/dim/mood lighting

SOUND: A person might struggle with loud/sudden noises, overlapping voices, certain pitches or a lack of noise. Another might seek out loud music, repetitive sounds/words/songs or white noise.

What might help:

- Using subtitles for videos when the audio is too overwhelming
- Wearing headphones to reduce noise/utilise music for comfort
- Using ear plugs to lower background volume

TOUCH: A person might struggle with rough surfaces and textures, the feeling of dirt or unclean skin, clothes labels or human contact (e.g. hugs, handshakes etc.). Another might seek out objects to squeeze, fabrics to feel or people to embrace.

What might help:

- Setting a boundary to not be touched without consent
- Removing fabrics and materials from your environment that you dislike
- Find clothes with stamped labels rather than ones with external tags

SMELL: A person might struggle with strong or pungent smells, odours that are too overwhelming for them, or just too many different smells at once. Another might seek out powerful smells or like to overload themselves on favourite scents.

What might help:

- Keep to hand something that smells nice to you to counter any bad smells
- Use unscented products
- Use candles, diffusers or air fresheners to surround yourself with comforting smells

TASTE: A person might struggle with different textures in food (e.g. soft with crunchy), certain flavours or unfamiliar foods. Another might seek out hot/spicy/sour foods or chewy/stimmy foods.

What might help:

- Providing familiar/safe foods at meals
- Don't force trying new foods if not interested
- Be aware of clashing textures

INTEROCEPTION (processing info about physical needs on and inside the body):

A person might struggle with recognising physical needs (e.g. going to the toilet, feeling unwell, needing to eat/drink) whilst another might feel them intensely.

What might help:

- Creating routines/alarms/reminders for fulfilling bodily needs
- Be well prepared/equipped to fulfil needs e.g. taking water with you to places
- Fulfilling bodily needs earlier to avoid pains of thirst, hunger, full bladder etc.

MOVEMENT (Proprioception): A person might struggle with an overly aware sense of body positioning, becoming tired easily from movement or disliking tight clothes. Another might seek out physical activity (running, climbing etc.), have less awareness of personal space and have a need to fidget/cannot remain still.

What might help:

- Use of deep-pressure products like weighted blankets
- Keeping active through slower movements, e.g. walking instead of running

BALANCE (Vestibular): A person might struggle with sensitivities to balance and spatial orientation if moving too fast or have difficulties with motion sickness. Another might struggle with not moving at all or seek out movements such as dancing and swinging around.

What might help:

- Using trampolines, rollercoasters, rocking chairs to meet vestibular needs
- Physical support such as with stairs to help control balance with steps