



# Sensory Issues

Sensory issues are common in people with autism and are even included in the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder. Each autistic person is unique, and this includes their personal sensory sensitivities.

## People with autism might have sensitivities to:

- Sights
- Sounds
- Smells
- Tastes
- Touch
- Balance ([vestibular](#))
- Awareness of body position and movement ([proprioception](#))
- Awareness of internal body cues and sensations ([interoception](#))

Autistic people can experience both **hypersensitivity** (over-responsiveness) and **hyposensitivity** (under-responsiveness) to a wide range of stimuli. Most people have a combination of both.

Many autistic people experience **hypersensitivity** to bright lights or certain light wavelengths (e.g., LED or fluorescent lights). Certain sounds, smells, textures and tastes can also be overwhelming. This can result in **sensory avoidance** – trying to get away from stimuli that most people can easily tune out. Sensory avoidance can look like pulling away from physical touch, covering the ears to avoid loud or unpredictable sounds, or avoiding certain kinds of clothing.

**Hyposensitivity** is also common. This can look like a constant need for movement; difficulty recognizing sensations like hunger, illness or pain; or attraction to loud noises, bright lights and vibrant colors. People who are hyposensitive may engage in **sensory seeking** to get more sensory input from the environment. For example, people with autism may stimulate their senses by making loud noises, touching people or objects, or rocking back and forth.

## What do sensory issues feel like?

Having unique sensitivities to certain types of sensory input can create challenges in everyday situations like school, work or community settings. For someone who is **hypersensitive**, it can take a lot of effort to spend all day under LED or fluorescent lights, navigate a crowded space or process conversations in rooms with background noise. This can be incredibly physically and emotionally draining and can leave the person feeling too exhausted to do other important tasks.

Many autistic people use **stimming** as a form of **sensory seeking** to keep their sensory systems in balance. Repetitive movements, sounds, or fidgeting can help people with autism stay calm, [relieve stress](#) or block out uncomfortable sensory input.

However, constant movement can sometimes seem inappropriate or disruptive in certain settings (like the workplace), so autistic people often feel like they need to suppress their stimming. When this happens, it becomes more and more difficult to self-regulate, leading to **sensory overload**, exhaustion or burnout.

**Sensory overload** happens when an intense sensory stimulus overwhelms your ability to cope. This can be triggered by 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 in daily life. Sensory overload can feel like intense anxiety, a need to escape the situation or difficulty communicating. When the brain has to put all of its resources into sensory processing, it can shut off other functions, like speech, decision making and information processing.

## What do sensory issues look like?

Many people with autism show certain behaviors when they are experiencing a sensory issue:

- Increased movement, such as jumping, spinning or crashing into things
- Increased stimming, such as hand flapping, making repetitive noises or rocking back and forth
- Talking faster and louder, or not talking at all
- Covering ears or eyes

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- Difficulty recognizing internal sensations like hunger, pain or the need to use the bathroom
- Refusing or insisting on certain foods or clothing items
- Frequent chewing on non-food items
- Frequent touching of others or playing rough
- Difficulty communicating or responding as the brain shifts resources to deal with sensory input (**shutdown**)
- Escalating, overwhelming emotions or need to escape a situation (**meltdown**)

## Accommodations for sensory issues

Understanding and accommodating sensory issues can ease discomfort and increase opportunities for autistic people to learn, socialize, communicate and participate in the community. **Accommodations** might mean modifying the environment, using tools and strategies, or creating new habits or routines. Since sensory needs depend the environment, accommodations may need to be adapted for each setting.

### Examples of accommodations for hypersensitivity:

- Using light covers, sunglasses or a hat under fluorescent lights
- Wearing ear plugs or headphones in noisy environments
- Working in spaces with a closed door or high walls
- Avoiding strongly scented products
- Choosing foods that avoid aversions to textures, temperatures or spices
- Wearing soft, comfortable clothing
- Adjusting schedules to avoid crowds

### Examples of accommodations for hyposensitivity:

- [Visual supports](#) for those who have difficulty processing spoken information
- Using fidget toys, chewies and other sensory tools
- Arranging furniture to provide safe, open spaces
- Taking frequent movement breaks throughout the day
- Eating foods with strong flavors or mixed textures
- Weighted blankets, lap pads or clothing that provides deep pressure

Autistic people have the right to ask for reasonable accommodations at work and school. If you are the parent or support person of a child with autism, you can talk about [sensory accommodations at school](#) with their [IEP](#) team or consider a 504 plan.

## Self-advocacy for sensory issues

If you are an autistic person, you may need to **self-advocate** for your sensory needs to be met. This starts with learning about your needs so you understand what works and what doesn't work for you. Then, you can make changes to your environment, try new tools or strategies, or change your routines to better meet your needs.

Our [Self-Empowerment Roadmap](#) can help you learn more about your needs so you can overcome your challenges. Keep in mind that it can take time and lots of trial and error to fully understand your needs and figure out what accommodations work best for you.

Once you understand the accommodations you need, you can work with your employer and support team to get those needs met. Our [Employment Tool Kit](#) will give you the tools you need to navigate these conversations and cope with sensory issues in the workplace.

You can also reach out to the [Autism Response Team](#) at [help@autismspeaks.org](mailto:help@autismspeaks.org) to learn how to conduct a sensory scan and advocate for your needs at work.

## What resources are there to help with sensory issues?

- Learn how [occupational therapy](#) can help people with autism learn to better process sensory input in everyday environments.
- Learn how [feeding therapy](#) can address aversions to tastes and food textures, as well as under- and over-sensitivities that can hamper chewing and swallowing.
- Learn how [speech therapy](#) can use sensitivity-reducing and sensory-stimulating activities to improve speech, swallowing and related muscle movements.
- Learn how [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) can help manage anxiety and gradually increase tolerance to overwhelming sensory experiences.
- View Autism Speaks' [Autism-Friendly Events Calendar](#) for a list of sensory-friendly events in your area
- Learn about [sensory processing disorder](#) and potential accommodations at work.

### Need Personalized Support?

Our Autism Response Team (ART) is specially trained to connect people with autism, their families, and caretakers to information, tools, and resources.

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