

*Embracing
Autism*



Sensory Challenges

Post Diagnosis Workshop 3

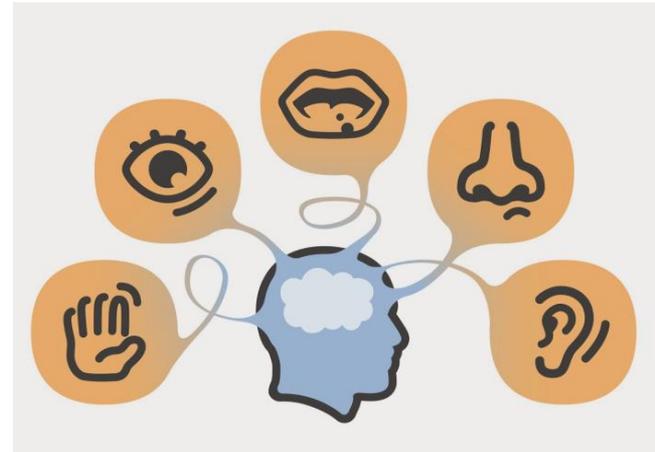


Objective of the Workshop



To develop a fuller understanding of:

- Sensory Challenges surrounding Autism Spectrum Condition



Plan

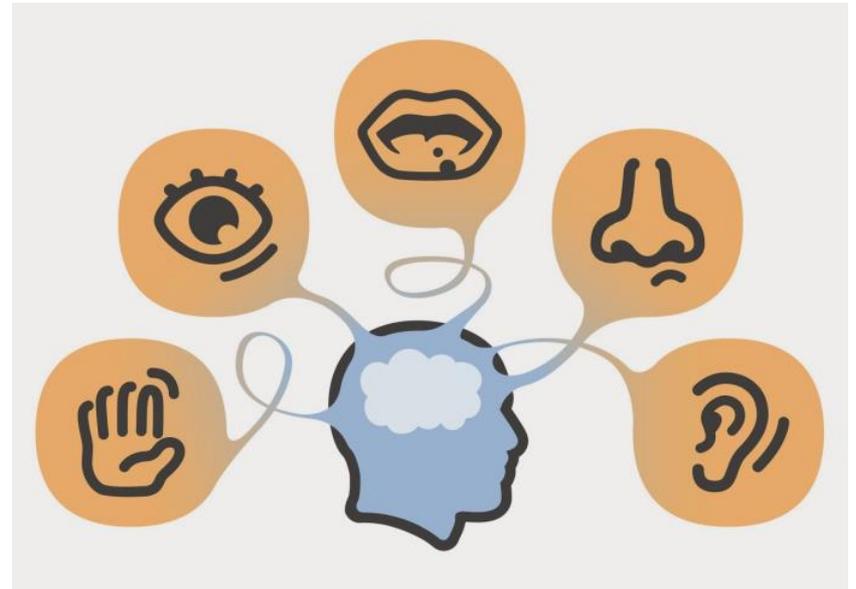
- What are sensory issues?
- Challenges with sensory sensitivities
- Meeting those challenges – What can you do to help yourself?



Sensory sensitivities

- Sight
- Sound
- Smell
- Taste
- Touch

- Balance
- Body awareness



Sight differences



- Under sensitive
 - Objects appear quite dark or out of focus
 - Poor depth perception
 - Problems with throwing and catching
- Over sensitive
 - Objects and bright lights can appear to jump around.
 - May see part of images not whole (faces)
 - Easier to focus on a detail rather than the whole object
 - Florescent lighting may be experienced as very unpleasant



Sound differences



- **Under-sensitive**

- May only hear sounds in one ear, the other ear having only partial hearing or none at all.
- May not acknowledge particular sounds.

- **Hyper-sensitive**

- Noise can be magnified and sounds become distorted and muddled.
- Particularly sensitive to sound and can, for example hear conversations in the distance.
- Inability to cut out sounds – notably background noise, which often leads to difficulties concentrating.
- Sudden unexpected noise can be particularly anxiety provoking.



Touch differences

- **Under sensitive**

- Need deep pressure
- High pain threshold
- May self-harm
- May enjoy heavy objects (e.g. weighted blankets) on top of them

- **Over sensitive**

- Light touch can be painful and uncomfortable
- Dislike having anything on hands or feet
- Difficulty brushing and washing hair because head is sensitive
- Only like certain types of clothing or textures



Taste differences



- **Under sensitive**

- Like very spicy foods
- Eat everything - soil, grass, play-dough (PICA)

- **Over sensitive**

- May find some flavours and foods too strong so may have a restricted diet
- Certain textures cause discomfort - may only eat certain textures



Smell differences



- **Under sensitive**

- Some people have no sense of smell and fail to notice extreme odours
- Some people may lick things to get a better sense of what they are.

- **Over sensitive**

- Smells can be intense and overpowering. This can cause toileting problems.
- May dislike people with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.



Balance differences

Situated in the inner ear, our vestibular system helps us maintain our balance and posture, and understand where and how fast our bodies are moving.



- **Under sensitive**
 - A need to rock, swing or spin to get some sensory input.
- **Over sensitive**
 - Difficulties with activities like sport, where we need to control our movements.
 - Difficulties stopping quickly or during an activity.
 - Car sickness.



Body awareness differences

Situated in the muscles and joints, our body awareness system tells us where our bodies are in space, and how different body parts are moving.



- **Under sensitive**

- Stands too close to others, because they cannot judge personal space.
- Hard to navigate rooms and avoid obstructions.
- May bump into people.

- **Over sensitive**

- Difficulties with fine motor skills: manipulating small objects like buttons or shoe laces.
- Moves whole body to look at something.



What is Sensory Overload?



- Too much information (information overload)
- Too much or too little sensory input can make it impossible for some autistic people to focus, relax or take part in ordinary activities



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Sensory overload – a 4 minute National Autistic Society film



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWPL3QPD4p0>



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Workshop activity



Working in pairs or small groups

Spend the next 10 minutes discussing the video or sharing your experiences around sensory difficulties.



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Meeting Sensory Challenges



Coping strategies for sound sensitivities



- Wearing ear defenders, headphones
- At a new or unfamiliar venue ask for support (show Autism Alert card) or about quiet areas – just knowing these are there may help
- Listening to music
- White noise may help



Coping strategies for visual sensitivities



- Wearing sun glasses to filter bright light
- Wearing glasses with tinted lenses
- Change or modify the environment – for example moving desk away bright light or from the window



Coping strategies for visual sensitivities



- Using bright colour coding to organise if under sensitive to light
- Avoid bright colours or visual clutter when trying to concentrate
- Modify lighting: turn off fluorescent lights, get soft lamps, dimmer lights, coloured light bulbs



Coping strategies for touch sensitivities



- Tell people what you do/ don't like
- Dress appropriately for the weather
- Squeeze vests may help to apply a constant pressure
- Weighted blankets will do the same



Coping strategies for touch sensitivities



- Choose clothes with fabric/ styles that are comfortable, cut off the labels
- You can buy several items of clothing, or in different colours if you find something that works for you
- Use self massagers or enjoy a massage with a choice of pressure to suit the individual



Other coping strategies to consider



- Stimming, fidget spinners, clicker dice might help
- Physical activity –trampolining, walking, running or dancing
- Relaxation and Meditation
- Mindfulness - focus all attention on your breathing or maybe play some relaxing music



Other coping strategies to consider



- Leave or avoid busy environments if possible – e.g. avoid busy supermarkets at the busiest times of the day
- Talk to others who are important to you about your preferences – e.g. ask them to speak more quietly, not wear perfume
- Try to avoid foods and smells that you dislike
- Take new experiences slowly to allow yourself time to adjust



Acknowledgements and further information

- We appreciate the valued input from Mark Feilden, working as an 'expert by experience' as part of Oxfordshire Adult Autism Diagnostic and Support Service team in producing this workshop.



- Phoebe Caldwell (2005) Creative Conversations (video)
- Carol Gray (1994) Comic Strip Conversations
- Donna Williams (2005) Blah, Blah, Blah (dvd)
- Donna Williams (1996) Autism: An Inside-out Approach
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