

SENSORY REGULATION

And How to Manage Sensory
Overload



Introduction

WHAT IS SENSORY REGULATION?



Sensory regulation, also called sensory processing, is a crucial process through which our nervous system processes sensory input in order to maintain focus, attention and respond to the environment.

Sensory regulation significantly influences our ability to self-regulate and adapt to our environment. When our sensory system is regulated, we can process and integrate sensory input in a way that allows us to navigate the world smoothly.

When people are sensory regulated, they are able to move through their environment with ease. Things like transitioning from tasks, interacting with other people, taking in sensory information all run much more smoothly.

WHAT DOES SUCCESSFUL SENSORY REGULATION LOOK LIKE?

1 Focused attention and engagement: The person finds it easier to maintain focused attention on tasks or conversations without being easily distracted by sensory stimuli in their environment. They can have sustained engagement and more effectively filter out irrelevant sensory information.

2 Emotionally balanced state: Sensory regulation often contributes to a stable emotional state. When someone is sensory regulated their emotions are more balanced, and they can effectively manage emotional responses to sensory input without becoming agitated or withdrawn.

3 Smooth transitions between activities: People who are sensory regulated can transition smoothly between different sensory environments or activities without becoming overwhelmed or disoriented. They adapt well to changes in sensory input and adjust their responses accordingly.

4 Comfortable engagement with sensory experiences: When sensory regulated, the person may seek out or enjoy sensory experiences that are aligned with their preferences. For instance, they might pursue a hug or engage in activities like swinging, rocking, or touching different textures to fulfil their sensory needs in a comfortable manner.

WHAT IS SENSORY DYSREGULATION?

Sensory dysregulation, sometimes called sensory overload, occurs when the sensory processing system struggles to manage and respond to sensory stimuli effectively. It can result in difficulties in maintaining a proportional level of arousal and coping with sensory input. People with sensory dysregulation may experience heightened sensitivity or reduced sensitivity to sensory input. This can lead to being easily overwhelmed by certain:

- sounds
- textures
- environments
- or having trouble staying focused in stimulating situations, such as parties or lectures.

Sensory dysregulation significantly impacts our daily functioning, emotions, and overall well-being.

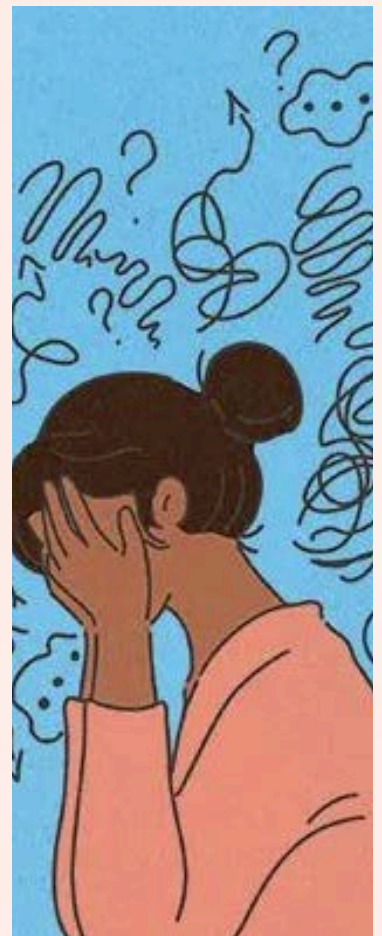
Understanding sensory dysregulation is essential for developing strategies to support us in navigating and coping with sensory challenges.



SYMPTOMS OF SENSORY OVERLOAD

Symptoms of sensory overload in adults vary widely and are influenced by individual sensory preferences. Some common experiences include:

- Feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or stressed in sensory-rich environments.
- Adults may experience difficulty focusing, concentrating, or maintaining attention due to excessive sensory input and difficulty filtering out background sensory input.
- Physical manifestations such as headaches, fatigue, nausea, muscle tension, or heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli can also occur.
- Emotional reactions may range from irritability, agitation, restlessness and frustration to feeling emotionally drained or overwhelmed.
- Some individuals may engage in coping mechanisms such as withdrawing from social interactions, seeking solitude, or engaging in repetitive behaviours to self-regulate (stimming).
- Sensory overload can result in insomnia and restless sleep.
- Sensory overload can also result in shutdowns leading to mild dissociation and feeling foggy or numbed out.
- Heightened sensitivity to sounds, especially loud or sudden noises typical in household environments or workplaces.
- Distress from strong or pervasive odours, affecting the ability to be in certain public spaces or use common household products.
- Discomfort in bright environments, particularly environments with fluorescent lights, such as offices or shops.



DO YOU EXPERIENCE SENSORY OVERLOAD?

Think about times when you may have experienced something like the symptoms described on the last page. Write out some of them here. Are there any sensory patterns you can find?

HOW TO MANAGE SENSORY OVERLOAD

1

Learn Your Triggers

Understanding your unique sensory triggers is a crucial step in developing a sensory safety plan. These triggers can arise from various sensory channels, such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and physical sensations.

By identifying these sensory triggers, you will be able to anticipate and prepare for challenging moments in your daily life. Keep track of when you experience sensory overload; do you dislike any particular textures or sounds? When do they occur? Do you ever feel exhausted or irritable for no apparent reason? If so, were you in a sensory-rich environment recently? Keeping a journal may help with learning all the sensory stimuli that you struggle with.



2

Utilise Sensory Tools and Strategies

With a clearer understanding of our sensory triggers, you can then move toward integrating sensory accommodations into your daily life. This proactive approach will support you to manage daily challenges more smoothly. Some examples of useful accommodations are:

- Noise-cancelling headphones: An effective way to minimise auditory distractions, allowing for greater focus and calm in noisy environments.
- Fidget toys or stress balls: Provides tactile stimulation that can help redirect nervous energy and enhance concentration.
- Mindfulness techniques: These practices are instrumental in regulating emotions and reducing stress, aiding in sensory regulation.
- Physical activities or repetitive movements: Activities like walking, or using a weighted blanket can help in grounding and calming the body.
- Rest and recharge when necessary.

HOW TO MANAGE SENSORY OVERLOAD

1

What do you think your sensory triggers are?

2

What tools or strategies do you think might help?