

We have known for a long time now about the difficulties in communication, social interaction and rigidity of thought and behaviour that characterise autism, but in recent years much more has become known about the sensory difficulties and differences experienced by people with autism.

For people without autism, it is hard to understand the impact of these sensory issues on the lives of those with autism, but it is important that we try to see the world from their point of view so that we can appreciate the need for modifying the sensory environment.

Each person with autism is affected differently, so it is almost impossible to predict exactly the sensory issues that may impact on a specific person. What follows is a general account of some of the possible areas of sensitivity that may be encountered and need to be taken into account, in order to work more effectively with someone with autism.

Sensory Processing

We all experience the world through our senses and our brains interpret the sensations for us so that we can make sense of our experiences and take appropriate action e.g. we feel cold so we put on a jumper. Because we are experiencing a myriad of sensations at any one time, our brains have a filter system that enables us to pay attention only to what is most important and relevant at the time. People with autism may not have this filter system, so all their sensations may be experienced at the same intensity all at once, which can lead to sensory overload in some environments.

Some psychiatrists and occupational therapists talk about hypo (under-sensitive) and hyper (over-sensitive) responses to sensory stimuli in people with autism, but this is highly individual and may vary from day to day, as well as from sense to sense, making it hard for the rest of us to know what is causing the difficulty in each situation. Some people with autism crave sensory experience; others avoid it. In addition, some have an acute sensitivity to some senses, which may cause them distress e.g. hypersensitivity to noise which may make it difficult to process two senses at the same time, so they may have difficulty in looking and listening at the same time. This causes problems with attention and concentration.

Sensory Modulation

In order for any of us to learn, develop and enjoy life, we need to be in a calm but alert state most of the time. If we are too sleepy and lethargic, we remain passive, cannot take in new ideas and have no energy or capacity for learning or enjoyment. If we are too agitated and edgy, we cannot retain what we have been told and are too worked up to make the most of our experiences. The same is true of people with autism, but they may also not recognise how they are feeling and what coping strategies they may need to manage their state of mind, their physical wellbeing and their emotional arousal. This is when the sensory environment may play a crucial part in determining how they cope in their daily lives. Most people with autism thrive best in a calm, uncluttered, quiet, ordered environment – just like many of us!

Vision

Some people with autism have an excellent eye for detail. They may be fascinated by the pattern, colour and form of everyday objects and the play of light on objects in their environment that others simply do not see and get distracted by. However, they may also get agitated by busy visual displays and by certain colours. Sensory rooms that use colour and light can be a very positive experience for someone with autism.

Hearing

Some people with autism may get distressed by noisy places and find the pitch of certain sounds painful or be disturbed by the low hum of electrical equipment nobody else notices. They may love to make noise even if they cannot tolerate noise from others. Listening to music is often a favourite activity.

Smell

Some people with autism may recognise people by their smell rather than appearance, so be prepared for someone with autism to not know who you are if you change your perfume or deodorant. A dislike for some smells may cause refusal to enter some environments – a real problem if this is a school building, place of work, toilet or restaurant.

Touch

Some people with autism are tactile defensive – they cannot bear to be touched. Often, light touch is harder to tolerate than firm touch. The feel of shoes, clothing and labels may be unbearable, so they take them off at every opportunity. Sensations such as heat, cold, hunger, thirst and pain may not be experienced in a conventional way. Essential activities such as dressing, washing, brushing teeth, cutting nails and having a hair cut may be problematic because they are felt to be invasive.

Taste

Faddy eating and idiosyncratic responses to the look, smell and texture of food, as well as the taste, can cause real difficulties with mealtimes. Some people with autism have a condition known as pica – the ingestion of inedible substances – they will eat ANYTHING, with paper, wood, sand and soil being particular favourites.

Sense of balance and awareness of self in space

Knowing where your own body stops and the rest of the world begins and knowing if you are standing up or lying down are fairly fundamental. Difficulties with such concepts may cause people with autism to be clumsy or to do a lot of rocking, flapping and jumping in order to be aware of where they are in space. They sometimes have a poor self-image or concept of self and may have an inability to 'see' themselves in social contexts, photographs or mirrors.

Seeking help

Occupational therapists run sensory integration programmes, undertake sensory assessments and can advise on a wide range of sensory equipment now available to overcome or compensate for some of these difficulties in people with autism.

The following websites supply sensory toys and equipment:

www.tocki.co.uk
www.rompa.co.uk
www.specialneedstoys.com

Some general strategies that can be tried include simply being aware of the difficulties and changing our approach to people with autism accordingly. Keeping things simple to avoid over-stimulation of activity, building routines, providing structure and boundaries in their daily lives and giving advance warning of change to bring predictability and minimise stress will all help people with autism cope better in sensory situations.

Modifying the environment to minimise sensory overload, if possible, can be very helpful. This can include avoiding fluorescent lighting, replacing it with subdued lighting, spotlights and uplighters; introducing carpets, curtains and soft furnishings to large rooms, to muffle the harsh sounds and echoes more and improve acoustics; using screens or partitions to divide up large rooms and providing a calm, quiet corner as a haven of peace in a noisy classroom or office will all reduce stress and enable the person with autism to cope better with the sensory demands of their surroundings.

Gradual exposure to the sights, sounds and/or smells they find disturbing may eventually lead to de-sensitisation, so that people with autism are better able to tolerate situations they could not bear initially. Providing them with purposeful activities, for example sports, household tasks and travel, will add meaning to their lives and help them improve their

movement, balance and spatial awareness skills.

Specific strategies that may help include:

- Providing different textures to handle or applying light touch followed by firm pressure for tactile seekers
- Giving items to mouth, suck, bite, blow and chew and opportunities for pushing, pulling, carrying and jumping will provide better 'feedback' to the muscles of the person with autism about how much pressure/force to apply for the desired result
- Providing opportunities for rhythmical movement – jogging, swimming, trampolining, climbing, dancing
- For a fearful person who shuns sensory activity, introduce movement slowly – gentle rocking, slow swinging, horse riding
- Wearing weighted vests/jackets or placing a weighted blanket over the body of the person with autism can aid the development of the sense of self in space and have a calming, soothing effect, as long as these items are only used for short periods at a time. Otherwise, the effect wears off.

Bibliography:

Olga Bogdashina: 'Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome'
NAS: 'Creating an Autism Friendly Environment'
NAS: 'The Sensory World of the Autistic Spectrum: A Greater Understanding'
Brenda Smith-Myles: 'Asperger Syndrome and Sensory Issues'

