

# Sensory Issues for People with an Autism Spectrum Condition

Many people with an ASC not only face problems with the Triad of Impairment (socialisation, communication, inflexibility of thought) but can also have difficulties processing everyday sensory sensations such as sound, sight, smell and touch. It is well documented now that the Triad of Impairment requires a fourth impairment, namely that of sensory processing difficulties. Some individual are diagnosed with an additional Sensory Integration Disorder or SID.

Sensory processing difficulties observed in those with ASC, include hypo- or hyper-responsiveness to sensation (under or over-reaction to sensation) but most often the difficulty that those with ASC face is that of poor Sensory Modulation. This refers to a fluctuating and changeable response to sensation, which is often misinterpreted as behavioural or a negative attitude. All learning occurs through the brain responding to sensation – be it touch, sound, light, smell, taste or movement. When the brain's response to sensation is disorganised, learning is disrupted. This can impact greatly on a person with ASC, making everyday tasks and life in general more difficult and in some extreme cases impossible to carry out.

If behaviours have become unusually more challenging/negative it is important to carry out a medical check up to discount any problems, as due to their sensory issues an individual may not always be able to pinpoint where something hurts (or even realise that something hurts at all!) and therefore tell you.

## Sensory Issues

### Auditory System (hearing)

Hypo-responsive behaviours include:

- appear not to hear or seem to be ignoring others
- make noise to block out or control the pitch of the other noise
- listen to music/TV on a loud volume
- have difficulty differentiating pitch and tone
- benefit from having their name said before anything further is said to them.

Hyper-responsive behaviours include:

- dislike unexpected or loud noises
- cover ears with hands
- have difficulty staying on task due to noise distractions, such as a ticking clock, passing transport, other people, vacuum cleaner
- may benefit from wearing ear defenders or an iPod.

### Visual System (sight)

Hypo-responsive behaviours include:

- like bright contrasting colours
- stare and be unaware that this can be deemed rude or make people feel awkward
- rub or poke eyes to get the visual stimulation of the lights they see from doing it
- flap hands/fingers in front of their eyes to see the contrast of light
- benefit from having visually stimulating work and environments to meet the high need for visual information.

Hyper-responsive behaviours include:

- be sensitive to light preferring to be in the dark
- may switch off lights or prefer blinds closed
- have difficulty differentiating things on busy backgrounds which will cause anxiety
- have difficulty coping in typical classroom environment

- have difficulty reading things with very busy backgrounds
- benefit from having uncluttered and distraction free work and environments.

### Tactile System (touch)

Hypo-responsive behaviours include:

- be unaware of pain or have reduced awareness and are therefore more likely to get injured or burned
- have an unusual need to touch and feel objects often to process more information
- like to be barefoot to feel floor/ground texture
- be unaware when hands/face get messy
- need more supervision to help keep them safe
- like to be touched firmly.
- benefit from enhanced tactile input for learning, i.e. textured materials in clothing or in objects and tasks engaged in; enhancing tactile input during learning experiences

Hyper-responsive behaviours include:

- be fussy about cleanliness
- dislike of differences in temperature or varying textures
- negative reaction to being touched, preferring firm touch
- dislike self care activities such as bathing/showering, cleaning teeth, brushing or combing hair
- be a fussy eater
- become irritated by certain textures of clothing and/or labels in clothes
- may prefer having labels cut out of clothes, or wearing socks inside out so seams do not irritate.

### Pain

Some people with ASD have a high pain threshold and therefore may be unaware they are injured or unwell and for this reason they will need to be closely watched if they have falls, high temperatures etc so that any serious injury or illness can be treated accordingly.

Others may have a very low pain threshold and any scratch or knock can cause them considerable pain and distress and they may require a lot of reassurance. Both of these responses are as a result of a disordered sense of touch.

### Olfactory System (smell)

Hypo-responsive behaviours include:

- don't notice strong smells and may seek out strong smells like perfumes/aftershaves
- may seek out smell by using it as a tool to find out more about environment – people and objects.

Hyper-responsive behaviours include:

- may gag, retch or vomit as a result of smelling something they dislike
- dislike eating in the school dining room due to the different smells
- benefit from toiletries with mild or no smell
- be sensitive to smells others may not notice
- dislike shops/corridors at school due to too many smells
- dislike strongly flavoured foods including mints

### Gustatory System (taste)

Hypo-responsive behaviours include:

- smell, mouth or lick items including food to gain more information, like a toddler would
- have a preference for certain smells and tastes
- crave certain foods
- seek more flavour, such as hot chillies, strong curries, spicy food since most food tastes bland to them
- prefer finger foods
- be unaware of temperature and inadvertently eat or drink hot items.

Hyper-responsive behaviours include:

- gag, retch on food or even cutlery
- be picky eaters particularly regarding textures which could lead to a restricted diet
- avoid highly flavoured or aromatic foods preferring bland foods

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- limit themselves on certain foods and may become distressed when offered alternatives
- dislike other people touching their food but may tolerate pre-packed shop bought sandwiches and snacks, providing they are the only one to open the packaging
- may prefer to cover all food with a particular flavour e.g. tomato sauce, mayonnaise, chocolate sauce to avoid having to smell or taste the less preferred substances.

## Vestibular and Proprioceptive Systems (movement and body awareness in relation to environment)

### Hypo-responsive behaviours include:

- may execute large movements in order for the brain to register them
- may enjoy movement activities with play equipment, spinning around, moving toys
- may wriggle and fidget or unconsciously rock back and forth and rock on chairs
- may use too much or too little force.

### Hyper-responsive behaviours include:

- become disorientated with moving in certain ways, therefore can become very restricted in movement
- avoid play equipment, sport apparatus, heights and moving toys
- dislike activities such as gymnastics/swings
- suffer from motion sickness
- caution when using steps, ramps or moving around unfamiliar environments.

## Occupational Therapy

Children and young people may benefit from occupational therapy to help them in coping with their sensory difficulties or by adapting activities to compensate for their sensory difficulties. In addition, an OT trained in Sensory Integration Therapy will be able to offer help in overcoming some of the sensory difficulties experienced by those with ASC.

A report from an Occupational Therapist can form part of a Statement of Special Educational Needs, help with a DLA claim, help to get support from Social Services etc.

Discuss it with your GP, social worker, nurse, physiotherapist or any other professional who knows you and they may be able to point you in the right direction for seeing an OT. The other option, if there is a long waiting list, is to find one in private practice.

Website: [www.cot.co.uk/about-ot/how-ot-can-help](http://www.cot.co.uk/about-ot/how-ot-can-help)  
Information from the NHS: [www.nhs.uk/conditions/occupational-therapy/Pages/introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/occupational-therapy/Pages/introduction.aspx)

## USEFUL READING

### Cambian free Information Sheets

Includes for ASC: Behaviour Support; Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour; Motivation; Sensory Issues and Coexisting Conditions; Social Skills; Stress and Anxiety; Educational Issues; various coexisting conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, Tourette's, SEN advice. See the Cambian information sheet 'Books – where to find them' for a list of specialist publishers with a huge range of books, especially: [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk) and [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com)

### National Autistic Society

The sensory world of autism: [www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/thesensory-world-of-autism.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/understanding-behaviour/thesensory-world-of-autism.aspx)

## USEFUL WEBSITES

Sensory Integration Network UK a not-for-profit organisation who promote education, good practice and research into the theory and practice of Ayres' Sensory Integration: [www.sensoryintegration.org.uk/](http://www.sensoryintegration.org.uk/)

Hirstwood Training and Florich Productions Multi sensory approaches, free ideas and information papers to download, in house training:

[www.multi-sensory-room.co.uk/index.html](http://www.multi-sensory-room.co.uk/index.html)

The following provide special needs equipment including clothing, chew replacements and sensory toys.

### Cerebra

has a Postal Lending Library including sensory items and toys designed for tactile, audio and visual stimulation are all available to hire (1 sensory item for 1 month) with no postage costs. Website: [www.cerebra.org.uk/English/gethelp/library/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.cerebra.org.uk/English/gethelp/library/Pages/default.aspx)

### Chewigem

[www.chewigem.co.uk](http://www.chewigem.co.uk)

### Fledglings

[www.fledglings.org.uk/docs/pdf/brochure](http://www.fledglings.org.uk/docs/pdf/brochure)

### ROMPA

[www.rompa.com](http://www.rompa.com)

### SenseToys

[www.sensetoys.com/toyssearchresults.php](http://www.sensetoys.com/toyssearchresults.php)

### Sensory Direct

[www.sensorydirect.com](http://www.sensorydirect.com)

### Sensory Smart Store

[www.sensorysmart.webeden.co.uk/](http://www.sensorysmart.webeden.co.uk/)

Sockshop has seamless socks:

[www.sockshop.co.uk/by\\_type/specialist/seamless\\_toe/index.html](http://www.sockshop.co.uk/by_type/specialist/seamless_toe/index.html)

### Special Direct Web

[www.specialdirect.com](http://www.specialdirect.com)

### Winslow

[www.winslow-cat.com](http://www.winslow-cat.com)

### Sensory Toy Warehouse

[www.sensorytoywarehouse.com](http://www.sensorytoywarehouse.com)

### TFH (Special Needs Toys)

[www.specialneedstoys.com](http://www.specialneedstoys.com)

### TTS

[www.tts-group.co.uk/shops/tts/Range.aspx?nguid=2bdd9e29-3595-4ede-bbd8-7d929e734a72](http://www.tts-group.co.uk/shops/tts/Range.aspx?nguid=2bdd9e29-3595-4ede-bbd8-7d929e734a72)

### True to Life Ltd

[www.truefolifesensory.co.uk](http://www.truefolifesensory.co.uk)

Acknowledgement: The content of this information sheet has been checked by Sylvia Dubarry, Clinical Lead Occupational Therapist for Cambian Education.

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All the information sheets are checked and amended annually. Please ensure you have the current version.



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