



WellTreePsychology

Nurture Your Mind

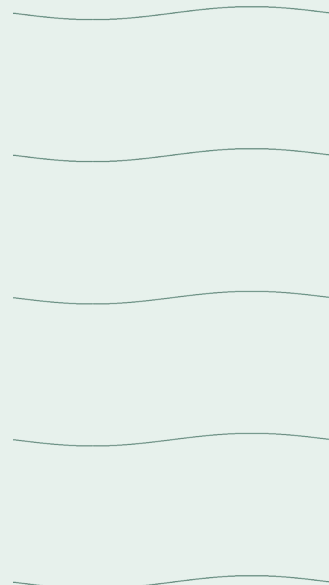
FREE CLIENT RESOURCE

Sensory Processing and Regulation

A practical neuro-affirming guide to sensory differences, overload and accessible environments.

The goal is not to make a person tolerate avoidable distress. The goal is to understand the sensory need and improve safety, access and choice.

Free client resource | Information checked 17 July 2026



Sensory processing in everyday life

Sensory processing is the way the nervous system receives, organises and responds to information from outside and inside the body. Everyone has sensory preferences. For many Autistic people, sensory differences are more pronounced and can substantially affect comfort, attention, communication, movement, sleep and participation.[1,2]

A person may be more sensitive to some input, less sensitive to other input, seek particular sensations, or experience a combination. Sensory responses can also change with stress, fatigue, illness, pain, hunger, uncertainty and the amount of control a person has over the situation.

A sensory response is real even when other people do not notice the input. What feels ordinary to one nervous system can be distracting, painful or difficult to detect for another.

Eight sensory systems

1. Vision Light, glare, colour, movement, patterns, visual clutter and distance.	2. Hearing Volume, pitch, sudden sounds, background noise and competing voices.
3. Touch Clothing, textures, temperature, light touch, pressure, grooming and unexpected contact.	4. Taste Flavour, texture, temperature, mixed foods and aftertaste.
5. Smell Food, perfume, cleaning products, smoke, people, places and environmental odours.	6. Vestibular Balance, speed, spinning, head position and movement through space.
7. Proprioception Information from muscles and joints about force, pressure and body position.	8. Interoception Internal signals such as hunger, thirst, pain, temperature, heartbeat and the need for the bathroom.

Recognising sensory overload

Sensory overload can occur when the amount, intensity or unpredictability of input exceeds what a person can comfortably process. Social demands, uncertainty, pain and cognitive effort can add to the total load.

Possible early signs

Body and movement covering ears or eyes, pacing, increased stimming, freezing, leaving, seeking pressure, changes in breathing	Communication shorter answers, delayed responses, repeated words, difficulty choosing, reduced speech or using AAC more
Emotion and attention irritability, panic, tearfulness, appearing distracted, difficulty following instructions or sudden urgency	Physical discomfort headache, nausea, pain, dizziness, fatigue, feeling too hot or cold, or needing the bathroom

These signs are not a checklist for autism and can have many causes. The most useful information comes from learning the person's own patterns and asking what helps.

What can help in the moment

- Reduce demands and stop non-essential questions.
- Move to a quieter, dimmer or less crowded space where possible.
- Use short, concrete language and allow more response time.
- Offer choices without pressuring the person to explain immediately.
- Allow familiar regulation tools, movement, headphones, sunglasses, pressure or silence.
- Avoid crowding, touching without consent or insisting on eye contact.
- Allow recovery time after the immediate situation has passed.

During overwhelm, safety and regulation come before teaching, reasoning, consequences or detailed discussion. Review what happened later, when the person is ready.

Designing lower-sensory environments

Accessible environments give people useful information, meaningful control and a safe way to reduce input. Small adjustments can prevent distress and support participation without changing the person's identity.

At home Use adjustable lighting; create a quiet recovery space; warn before noisy appliances; offer clothing and food choices; make routines visible.	At school or study Provide written instructions; reduce visual clutter; allow movement and headphones where safe; offer a quieter work or lunch space; plan transitions.
At work Clarify priorities in writing; reduce unnecessary meetings; offer flexible location or hours; provide a lower-traffic workspace; agree on a communication plan.	Appointments and travel Share what will happen in advance; identify waiting times; offer first or last appointments; allow a support person; plan an exit or break option.

Four useful design principles

Build in access • Predictability - explain what will happen and what may change. • Control - let the person adjust, pause or leave when possible. • Options - provide more than one way to communicate or participate. • Recovery - protect time and space to regulate after demanding situations.	Check the cause • Is there pain, illness, hunger, thirst or fatigue? • Is the environment louder, brighter or more crowded than usual? • Has the person had to mask or manage many demands already? • Is the request unclear, unexpected or difficult to start?
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About exposure

A person should not be forced to endure avoidable sensory pain in order to appear typical. Some people choose gradual practice for a personally meaningful goal, ideally with informed consent, control, a clear stop signal and access to regulation. Accommodation remains appropriate when it is the safer or more effective option.

My sensory profile

Use this page to identify patterns. Complete it alone, with a trusted person, or over several days. There are no right answers.

Input I enjoy or seek

Examples: deep pressure, music, movement, water, soft textures, strong flavours, dim light.

Input I avoid or find painful

Consider sound, light, touch, smell, taste, movement, visual clutter and internal body signals.

My early signs of overload

What changes in my body, movement, communication, attention or emotions?

What helps me regulate

Include tools, people, places, movement, pressure, silence, food, rest or communication options.

My support and recovery plan

How I want other people to respond

What should people say, stop doing, offer or avoid when I am overloaded?

My communication plan

How can I show 'stop', 'break', 'too much', 'not now', 'pain' or 'I need help'?

Recovery usually takes

What helps afterward, and how much time or reduced demand do I need?

Share this plan only with people you choose. Review it when circumstances, health, environments or support needs change.

Sources and further reading

1. Sensory Processing - Autism New Zealand. [Open source](#)
2. What is autism? - Altogether Autism. [Open source](#)
3. Low Sensory Sessions - Tips and Information - Autism New Zealand. [Open source](#)
4. Practical tools and information sheets - Positive Partnerships. [Open source](#)

WellTree Psychology

For information about WellTree Psychology's online autism and ADHD assessment and therapy services across Australia, visit the website or contact the practice.

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Important note

This guide provides general information and is not a substitute for individual health or psychological advice. New or severe pain, fainting, breathing difficulty, sudden confusion, injury or other acute health concerns require appropriate medical assessment.

In an immediate emergency, call 000 in Australia or 111 in New Zealand. For crisis support in Australia, call Lifeline on 13 11 14. In New Zealand, call or text 1737 for brief emotional support.