

Strategies and Resources: **Sensory Needs and Mental Health**

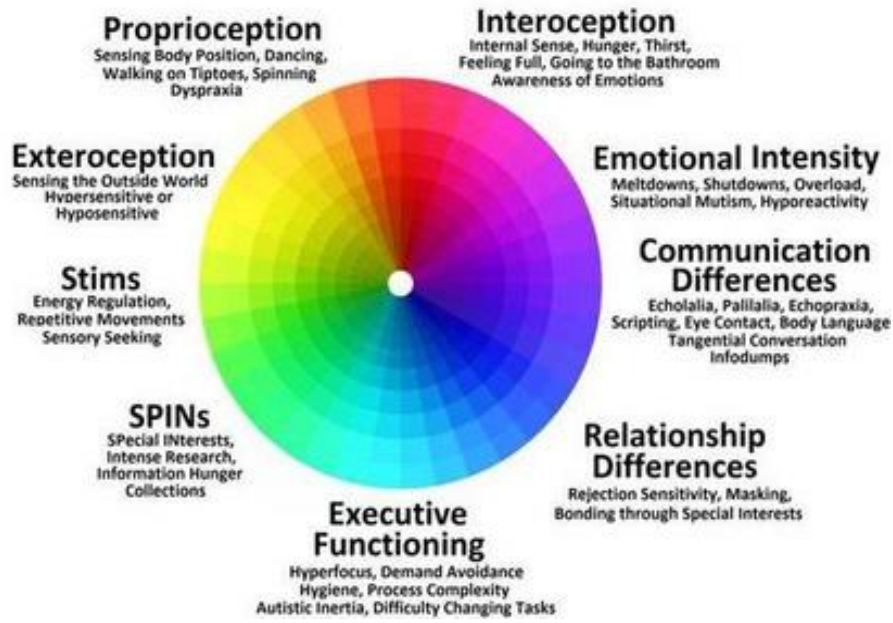
Autistic people experience a number of sensory needs and differences, and this sensory processing can change our daily experiences and coping strategies, as well as the sensory tools available.

As autistic people, some of us may be very aware of sensory adjustments or may only just be starting to advocate for them and others may be new to exploring what their sensory needs could be.

We hope that this resource will help you to explore your sensory needs and how they relate to our mental wellbeing and health.

Types of Sensory Needs:

Sensory needs can encompass a wide variety of inputs, outputs, and internal stimuli. There are the main five that most people are familiar with (**Sight, Sound, Touch, Taste and Vision**), along with **internal needs** such as thirst, bladder fullness and hunger, as well as **proprioception**, which is the sense of your body in spaces, and **vestibular needs**, affecting control of movement and balance.



(Image A)

Each of these should be considered when discussing and accounting for sensory needs, along with the understanding that there is no universal autistic experience, and that people may have varied and sometimes opposing sensory needs, as well as tolerances.

While sensory sensitivities and needs to avoid or reduce the impacts of various stimuli are most recognised, as a part of spikey profiles in particular, sensory seeking can also form a part of sensory regulation and sensitivities.

As an example, while some people may find noise overstimulating, others may find a lack of input to be disorienting or make it harder to focus on various tasks, which may be exacerbated by co-occurring conditions such as ADHD.

Sensory Needs and Spikey Profile:

Sensory sensitivities and needs to avoid or reduce the impacts of various stimuli can be explored as a part of a spikey profile.

One of the biggest misconceptions about autism is that autistic people's experiences and needs are on a spectrum, or linear measurement. We prefer to explore autistic

experiences via the use of a wheel, with segments accounting for specific autistic traits, strengths, and needs (view Image A).

A strength could be sensory regulation through stimming for example, and a need may be to limit overstimulating noise. Whereas others may find a lack of sensory input to be disorienting or make it harder to focus on various tasks e.g. needing music to finish the washing up.

Our sensory needs as autistic people can also be influenced by dual diagnosis, or cooccurring conditions, such as ADHD, or Dyspraxia.

Sensory Regulation and Stimming:

Sensory seeking can also form an integral part of sensory regulation and enables us to meet optimal sensory input, as well as mediate how that input is received. For example, while wearing directional ear plugs some noise can be limited and help to filter out background noise as well.

Other forms of sensory regulation can include Stimming, also known as self-stimulating behaviour, which can be personalised, and cover numerous different stimulating activities, such as:

- **Physical Stimming:** Bodily movements, such as spinning, pacing, rocking, breathing patterns and facial expressions.



- **Vocal Stimming:** Repeating words, sounds, phrases, as well as singing or humming.



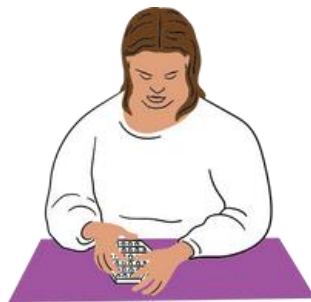
- **Visual Stimming:** Turning lights on/ off, shadow puppets, coloured lenses, sensory lights.



- **Tactile Stimming:** Stroking, scratching, or touching surfaces and fabrics, along with stim tools.



- **Object Stimming:** This involves physical tools, such as spinning wheels, picking pads, chewlery, kinetic sand, stim rings etc.



Stimming and Unmasking:

Stimming is a personal experience, and each autistic person may find different stims that work for them or stims that do not. Stimming can be something autistic people discover later in life, especially if they mask regularly in daily life and do not feel safe to unmask.

Unmasking and exploring stimming to achieve sensory regulation can take time, so please remember to be generous with yourself.

Considerations for unmasking and exploring stimming may be:

- **Addressing the Pressure to Conform** whether this is in your workplace, around family, partner(s), or friends, validating your autistic experience and knowing your sensory needs are important and should be addressed.
- **Educating Others about your Sensory Needs**, as well as setting boundaries about your sensory needs, the tools, and adjustments you require.
- **Develop Coping Strategies**, using a Sensory Diet or Sensory Toolkit to understand how to mediate sensory sensitivities and how to support your sensory seeking needs.
- **Prioritise Your Comfort and Safety**, sometimes it helps to stim in an environment you feel safe, especially if you are struggling to unmask. Familiarity and predictability can help to reduce the risk or overload and mean that you are in a place where you feel accepted and supported.

Sensory Overload:

Sensory overload can be a result of intense, or continuous sensory and environmental input, and is often triggered by a layering effect of overstimulating sensory inputs e.g. flashing lights, car alarms, full bladder etc.

Sensory overload may also be delayed, and you may experience it hours after the inciting incident, or not be obvious to the individual until it has become overwhelming, exacerbated by issues such as Alexithymia, which may also hinder measures to deal with overstimulation.

Other factors that may be less well understood or recognised, both by others and the autistic individual can include being given too much information at once, for example at work or school, or not being given enough time to process information, particularly through verbal communication.

This can cause quite severe stress and disruption to the individual, and if measures are not taken to deal with this, whether by mitigating or reducing the sensory input, then this can lead to autistic meltdowns, or shutdowns.

These can have a number of effects depending on the individual but are generally characterised by extreme distress that can be mistaken for a panic attack or a tantrum for the former, and as a sudden unresponsiveness or loss of energy and ability to engage in tasks or activities for the latter.



Sensory Regulation and Impact on Mental Health:

Keeping sensory sensitivities in check and ensuring your sensory needs are met can play a significant part in both avoiding sensory overload and meltdowns, as well as contributing to mental wellbeing. Here are a couple of ways sensory needs can influence mental health:

Emotional Regulation:

Inability to meet sensory needs or maintain sensory regulation can have a severe impact on both your mental wellbeing and ability to regulate emotions, as an example you may find it more difficult to communicate in an even tone or may experience panic attacks or meltdowns when overstimulated.

Sensory understimulation can also impact emotional regulation, with some finding lack of certain sensory input can make it difficult to focus, or cause some distress; for example some people may find silence, or background noise distracting or irritating, and find that music or other sensory inputs such as tactile tools help to focus.

Un/Masking:

Social expectations and fear of rejection can reduce our ability to engage in sensory regulation, stimming or unmask to meet sensory needs. Practicing sensory regulation and setting boundaries about our own needs can also help us to feel safe to unmask.

Many Autistic people will feel compelled to mask in neurotypical spaces, particularly in work or education, and this can have a noticeable impact on your ability to both recognise sensory needs, and to react to them healthily.

Masking can mean that autistic people limit or avoid stimming and other self-regulating behaviours in order to fit neurotypical expectations, or endure environments and situations that may lead to being overwhelmed without seeking reasonable adjustments or notifying others of their distress.



Stress and Anxiety Management:

Sensory regulation plays a major role in managing stress and anxiety, with overstimulation being particularly likely to lead to meltdowns or shutdowns, which can in turn make managing stress more difficult, and the possibility of which can contribute to anxiety, leading some to avoid situations and environments.

Ensuring that you are able to meet sensory needs, and that adjustments are implemented to support those needs can help to alleviate stress. This may include creating sensory diet plans and creating or designating a safe sensory environment which gives you space to relax and recuperate after stressful situations, which can help to combat sensory overload.

Sleeping Pattern and Relaxation:

Sleep and maintaining a healthy sleep schedule can have a significant impact on mental wellbeing, and sensory regulation can strongly influence this, for example temperature, texture of sheets, lighting noise can all affect ability to sleep.

Anxiety and stress can also play a role, and as discussed previously, these can be influenced by sensory regulation.

Lacking the proper environment to relax can also impact ability and quality of sleep, for many of the same reasons, and adjusting your sensory environment and routine can be a major factor in creating a healthy sleep schedule. You may wish to implement adaptations and tools to reduce sensory input such as blackout curtains or earplugs, or sensory seeking tools such as essential oils or white noise.



Validation and Self-advocacy: Avoiding sensory inputs that may be overwhelming may not always be possible, however there are

measures and adaptations you can take, or others can offer help to mitigate the impact.

These may include requesting reasonable adjustments and accommodations, such as changes to lighting or a quieter workspace, or use of headphones or earplugs to reduce noise, along with alternate communication methods.

Support resources:

Stim tools can be useful for many autistic people as a controlled sensory input, or to mediate existing sensory inputs and in doing so help to regulate mood. Common examples being items such as stress balls and other small objects providing tactile feedback that can be used discretely if preferred.


Sensory Need:	Potential tools:
Tactile	Stress ball, fidget toys
Visual	Sunglasses, sensory lights
Auditory	Headphones, noise cancelling earbuds
Gustatory	Chew Necklaces, herbal teas, preferred snacks
Olfactory	Essential oils, hand lotion, scented sachets
Vestibular	Spinning office chair, rocking chair, wobble seat
Proprioception	Massage roller, weighted blanket or lap pad, yoga balls

In school and work, along with a number of other settings such as doctor's appointments and support groups, you may find it useful to request reasonable adjustments.

The adjustments may include accommodations for use of various sensory tools, or environmental changes, such as dimmed lighting, moving furniture, offering alternative communication methods, or adaptations to workspaces such as screens around desks or designated quiet rooms.

Some of these adaptations and tools can be provided by Access to Work, Care Assessments, Personal Independence Payments (PIP), or Disabled Students Allowance.

Other support these services can provide may include support workers, assistive software, such as Brain in Hand or communication software.



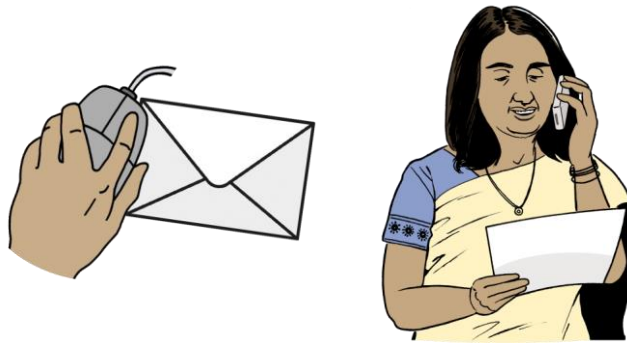
AIM can also provide a number of informational resources for related aspects of sensory regulation and mental wellbeing, for example guides covering support that can be provided to individuals in meltdown, and reasonable adjustments and how to request them, which can be accessed from the resources section of our website:

[Strategies and Resources - Leeds Autism AIM](#)

If you would like any further information on the following options, please discuss this with a member of staff and we will provide you with relevant signposting support, or direct you to one of our AIM guides.

Contact Us

This guide was produced by the **Autism AIM – Mental Health Equity Project**, part of The Advonet Group. We are a free service co-led by and run for autistic adults (aged 18+) in the West Yorkshire area.



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- Call The Advonet Group's office on **0113 244 0606** and ask for someone from our team
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