



**Mental Health**  
**Equity Project**

Strategies and Resources

# Sensory Needs

## What are Sensory Needs?

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.

## The Big 5 Senses



**Vision**

This sense to process light, colour and depth.



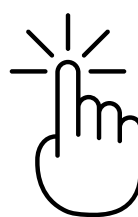
**Sound**

The sense to process soundwaves / vibrations.



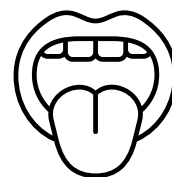
**Smell**

The sense to process smells and fragrances.



**Touch**

The sense for pressure, pain, temperature.



**Taste**

The sense for taste e.g. bitterness, or salty.

## Additional Senses and Sensory Needs

Sensory needs are expansive and go beyond 'The Big 5 Senses'. We will now detail other sensory needs and how we can support them as autistic adults:

### Vestibular Needs



The sensation in changes of position, direction and movement. Vestibular needs can be met through rocking, swinging, balancing, pulling, climbing, laying down etc.

### Internal Needs



Internal needs, also known as interoception relate to internal senses, such as thirst, pain, bladder fullness and hunger.

### Proprioceptive Needs



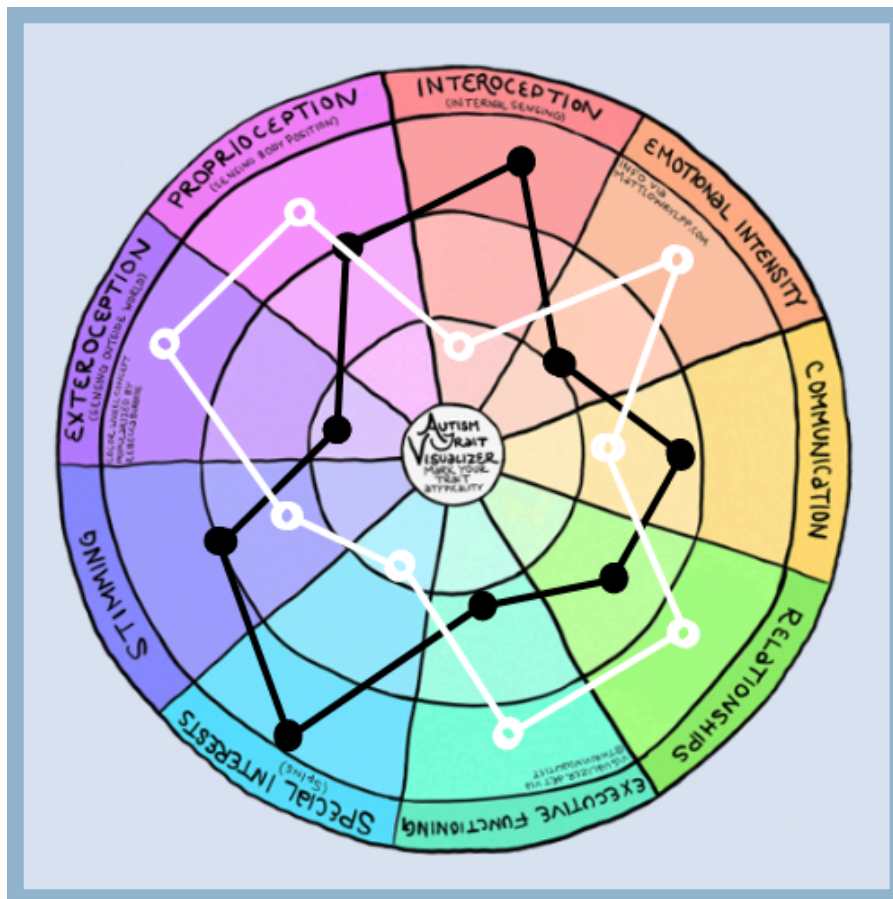
Proprioception is your bodies ability to sense relating to muscles, joints, effort of movement, heaviness and where your body is in space.

## Sensory Needs and the Spiky 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.

Sensory needs can be explored as a part of a spiky profile (view Image below):



The image above shows white and black plotting points to show how needs can be changeable day to day, and this is the same for sensory needs.

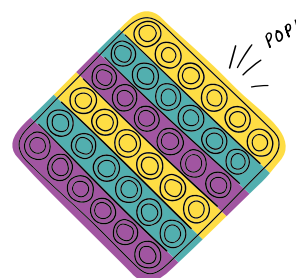
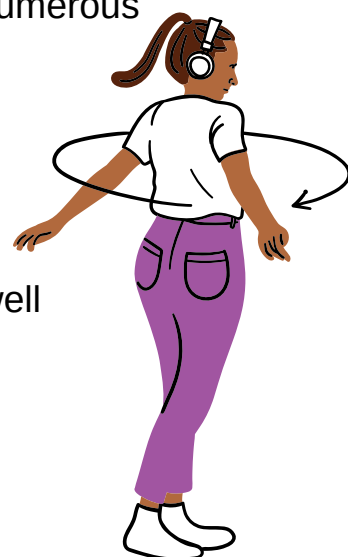
Our sensory needs as autistic people can also be influenced by dual diagnosis, or cooccurring conditions, such as ADHD, or Dyspraxia.

## Sensory Regulation and Stimming

Sensory seeking can also form an integral part of sensory regulation and enables us to meet optimal sensory experiences, or reduce overwhelming stimuli.

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. 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:** Discussing sensory needs in your workplace, around family, partner(s), or friends. Validate your autistic experience and know that your sensory needs are important and these needs should be met.
- **Educating Others about your Sensory Needs:** Setting boundaries about your sensory needs, tools, stims and the adjustments you require. Fostering your self-advocacy skills.
- **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:** It can help to stim in an environment you feel safe, especially if you are struggling to unmask. Familiarity and predictability can help to reduce the risk of overload and mean that you are in a place where you feel accepted and supported while exploring new stims.



## Sensory Overload

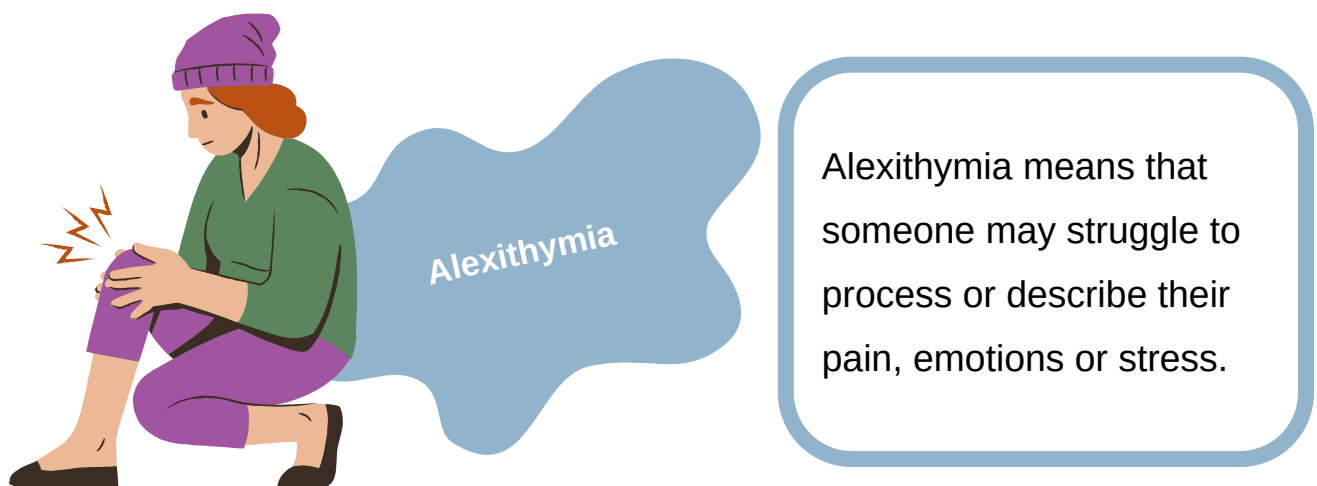
Sensory overload can be a result of intense or continuous sensory and environmental input.

Sensory overwhelm can also be triggered by a layering effect of sensory inputs e.g. flashing lights, ticking clocks, full bladder etc.



Sensory overload may also be delayed, and you can experience it hours after the initial sensory overwhelm.

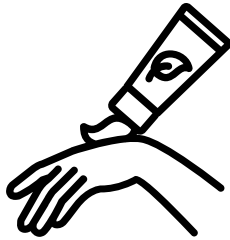
Unmet sensory needs may not be obvious to everyone until it has become overwhelming. Unmet sensory needs may be exacerbated by experiences such as alexithymia, which may also mask people's pain, frustration or stress.



Alexithymia means that someone may struggle to process or describe their pain, emotions or stress.

## Sensory Soothing Techniques

You can do activities that soothe and regulate your senses. This can be grounding and help you feel reconnected to your body when overwhelmed. For example:



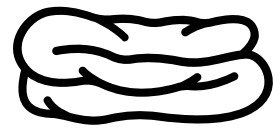
Using hand lotion



Squeezing putty or play dough



Relaxing scents or aromatherapy



Laying under a weighted blanket

It might be helpful to create a “sensory soothing kit” of items and tools that help you regulate your senses when feeling anxious. Sensory overwhelm is a state of high arousal, so it is better to use sensory items that soothe your system, rather than things that make you more alert. You might need to do a sensory profile and figure out what you like to help prepare.

It can also be very helpful to use techniques and tools that limit uncomfortable sensory input. This can help you navigate environments with a greater degree of sensory control and safety.



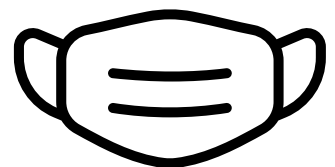
Ear defenders or headphones



Sunglasses to reduce light



Gloves as a barrier for touch



Mask/scarf to dampen smells



## Sensory Regulation Techniques: Part One

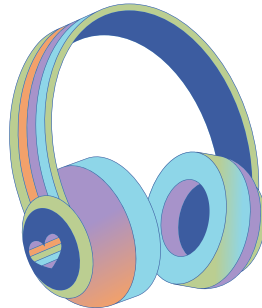
There are a variety of other activities that you can do to help you manage your sensory needs. You can choose ones that fit your energy levels, the amount of time you have available, your interests and figure out what works for you as an individual. Here are some examples:



**Soft textures, such as pets, or soft toys.**



**Snacks and Water Reminders:**  
To meet internal and taste sensory needs.



**Sound Reduction**



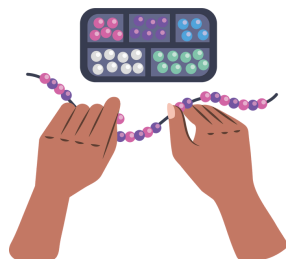
**Sleeping Pattern and Relaxation:**  
Maintaining a sleep schedule that is healthy for you, and having a sensory friendly sleeping space.



**Temperature Regulation:**  
Regulating body temperature is important and can reduce sensory overload. You may use ice packs, fans, jumpers etc.

## Sensory Regulation Techniques: Part Two

There are a variety of other activities that you can do to help you manage your sensory needs. You can choose ones that fit your energy levels, the amount of time you have available, your interests and figure out what works for you as an individual. Here are some more examples:



### Arts and Creativity:

This can help you to meet sensory needs while enjoying interests.



### Weight Blankets and Pressure:

Pressure such as firm hugs, can support proprioceptive needs.



### Lighting

### Sensory Planner:

A sensory plan can support daily activities and changing needs.



### Music and Auditory Stimming:

Music can support sensory seeking needs, and repeat listening can meet auditory stimming needs.



### Exercise and Movement:

Moving the body can meet numerous sensory needs. This could be via dancing, walking, hand flapping etc.

## Additional Ways to Support Sensory Needs



**Sensory Apps**  
(eg. Antistress)



**Funded Support**  
(eg. Access to Work)



**Reasonable  
Adjustments**



**Nature**



**Peer Support**

**Add your own here**

## Apps that Might Help



**Antistress - relaxation toys** is visual sensory app. The app allows you to select from a variety of stim tools to use on screen.



**Finch** is a self-care virtual pet app that offers a cute and fun way to look after your wellbeing. It sends reminders to drink water and stretch to meet internal needs.

# Additional Resources

## Local Organisations and Support

Leeds Recovery College – An NHS service that runs courses where you can learn more about mental health.

Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service – Offer a range of services and support for people struggling with mental health, such as anxiety.

Live Well Leeds – Provide a range of services to people with mild to moderate mental health needs, including 1-to-1 support and groups.

Further sources of support can be found in Leeds Autism AIM's Mental Health Guide: <https://leedsautismaim.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2023/04/Leeds-Autism-AIM-Mental-Health-Guide-v6-April-2023.pdf>

## Contact Us



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This guide was produced by the 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.