SENSORY PROFILE & NEEDS

It's a natural human experience to have our own sensory profile, and by that I mean our own unique sensory processing system and needs. However, as neurodivergent individuals, we're often more likely to have a different sensory processing system. Our sensory processing system takes in information we receive from all our senses and processes them so we can respond accordingly.

You might've heard of the five senses, but we actually have eight senses that impact our sensory needs and differences! Our external senses are the five senses we know; **sight, touch, smell, taste** and **sound.** We also have three internal senses which are **vestibular**, **proprioception** and **interoception**.

Proprioception is our body awareness and spatial awareness while our interoception is our internal body awareness like hunger cues. The third internal sense is vestibular, which is related to our balance and why you might experience motion sickness - because your vestibular system is over-sensitive!

Everyone manages and receives sensory input differently so our needs are unique and our sensory needs can shift as our environment changes and our capacity shifts.

A way to understand our sensory differences or sensitivities is by looking at our preferences with hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity. Everyone can experience both hyper and hyposensitivity with one, some, or many of the senses and our preferences can change daily, weekly or depending on different things.

Hypersensitivity

Hypersensitivity is an over-responsiveness to sensory input that can cause sensory overload, distress, discomfort and pain. Individuals who are hypersensitive tend to avoid certain stimuli or sensory input or need frequent breaks from sensory input.

Hyposensitivity

Hyposensitivity is an under-responsiveness to sensory input where individuals often struggle to register low levels of sensory input or may receive less information from the senses. Individuals who are hyposensitive tend to seek out and need higher levels of sensory input and stimulation.

EXAMPLES OF HYPERSENSITIVITY

VISUAL

- sensitive to light especially when sleeping
- details are easier to focus on
- lights appear too bright

SMELL

- sensitive to smells
- perfumes and shampoos are overpowering
- refusal to eat certain foods

SOUND

- sensitive to background noises
- multiple sounds are overwhelming
- startled by loud noises

TASTE

- certain textures cause discomfort and distress
- predictable diet and safe foods
- flavours are overwhelming

PROPRIOCEPTION

- prefer to sit down or remain grounded
- often leaning
- difficulties with fine motor skills

TOUCH

- hair brushing can cause discomfort
- textures on skin are irritating
- difficulty with wet textures

VESTIBULAR

- often gets car and motion sickness
- avoids swings, ladders, merry go rounds
- loses balance easily

INTEROCEPTION

- easily overwhelmed by internal sensations
- heightened sensitivity to physiological cues
- can cause anxiety or discomfort

MANAGING HYPERSENSITIVITY

VISUAL

- reduce fluorescent lighting
- utilise lamps
- use sunglasses
- reduce clutter/visual distractions

SMELL

- use fragrance free products
- ask for events or parties to be perfume free
- keep rooms ventilated

SOUND

- use noise cancelling headphones
- try out earplugs
- have a quiet area away from background noises

TASTE

- eat your preferred food
- don't force yourself to eat foods you don't want
- use chewellery (chew jewellery)

PROPRIOCEPTION

- reduce items with buttons/ laces
- use different seating like bean bags
- use grippy tools for items like pens or keys

TOUCH

- remove tags from clothing
- use seamless socks and items
- ask for firmer pressure over lighter pressure

VESTIBULAR

- reduce car ride length
- sit in front to reduce motion sickness
- regular breaks from movement activities

INTEROCEPTION

- use visual prompts and communication scripts
- frequent self-care breaks
- regulation strategies

EXAMPLES OF HYPOSENSITIVITY

VISUAL

- poor depth perception
- trouble locating an item
- difficulty identifying differences in pictures, words, etc

SMELL

- difficulty interpreting smells
- enjoys foods with strong smells
- uses smell to engage with objects or people

SOUND

- attracted to loud spaces
- difficulty localizing a sound
- often turns music or the TV up louder to register

TASTE

- likes foods with intense flavours
- has a predictable diet
- big on tactile stimming
- putting items in mouth

PROPRIOCEPTION

- difficulty navigating a room
- crashes into furniture
- prefers tight clothing and heavy blankets
- trouble balancing

TOUCH

- high pain threshold
- likes tight clothing and weighted blankets
- requires tight hugs to register the pressure

VESTIBULAR

- seeks all forms of movement like swinging
- frequent rocking back and forth
- always seeking stimuli

INTEROCEPTION

- difficulty sensing when hungry or thirsty
- requires more input to sense
- trouble interpreting what we're feeling

MANAGING HYPOSENSITIVITY

VISUAL

- have items on open shelves so it's easier to find
- have multiple forms of lighting
- reduce clutter

SMELL

- have scented items on hand
- CLEARLY label foods and items

SOUND

- provide visual cues & instructions
- ask for instructions to be broken down
- listen to music for sensory input

TASTE

- wear chew jewellery
- list of safe or same foods
- crunchy snacks on hand

PROPRIOCEPTION

- keep a room clear from furniture
- use input like weighted blankets
- use grip pens/weighted pens

TOUCH

- provide lots of fidget items
- use weighted blankets
- ask friends/partners for tighter hugs and pressure

VESTIBULAR

- get a chair swing, exercise ball or mini trampoline at home
- introduce a sensory diet
- frequent movement breaks

INTEROCEPTION

- regular check ins/breaks
- alternative descriptions
- accessible hydration options
- simple, quick snacks

SENSORY OVERLOAD

Neurodivergent individuals process sensory information differently every day. We may be hypersensitive or hyposensitive, or even both, at different times. Our sensory differences can impact how we feel, how we cope and can have a significant impact on our lives. As we live in a society that is full of sensory input that doesn't necessarily accommodate our needs, we can end up overstimulated from our environments.

Sensory overload is what happens when we receive too much input from our senses. These senses are the five senses we know; visual, touch, smell, taste and sound as well as the three internal senses which are; vestibular, proprioception and interoception.

When some or even all of these senses receive too much input for our brain to process and handle, we become overwhelmed which can cause a lot of discomfort, pain and distress. Our sensory differences can also impact our functioning and our everyday lives, from emotional regulation to getting things done to socialising.

It's normal and common for every human to have limits on the amount of sensory input we need and can handle, but for neurodivergent individuals, our brains receive and process sensory input differently, which means we're more likely to reach our limits and experience sensory overload.

Signs of Sensory Overload

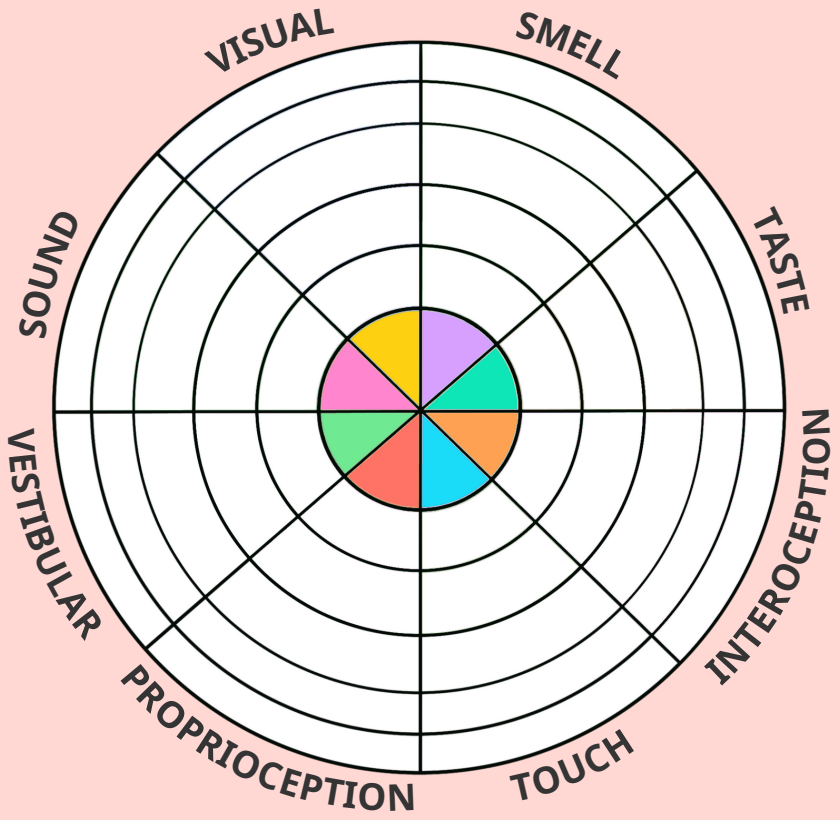
irritability
restlessness
fidgeting
increased stimming
need to escape or avoid
everything is moving too fast
difficulty focusing
feeling wound up
headaches
freeze response
feeling instantly exhausted

The best way to respond to sensory overload is by reducing or removing the sensory input that is contributing to the sensory overload. In order to do this, you need to have an understanding of your sensory needs and differences.

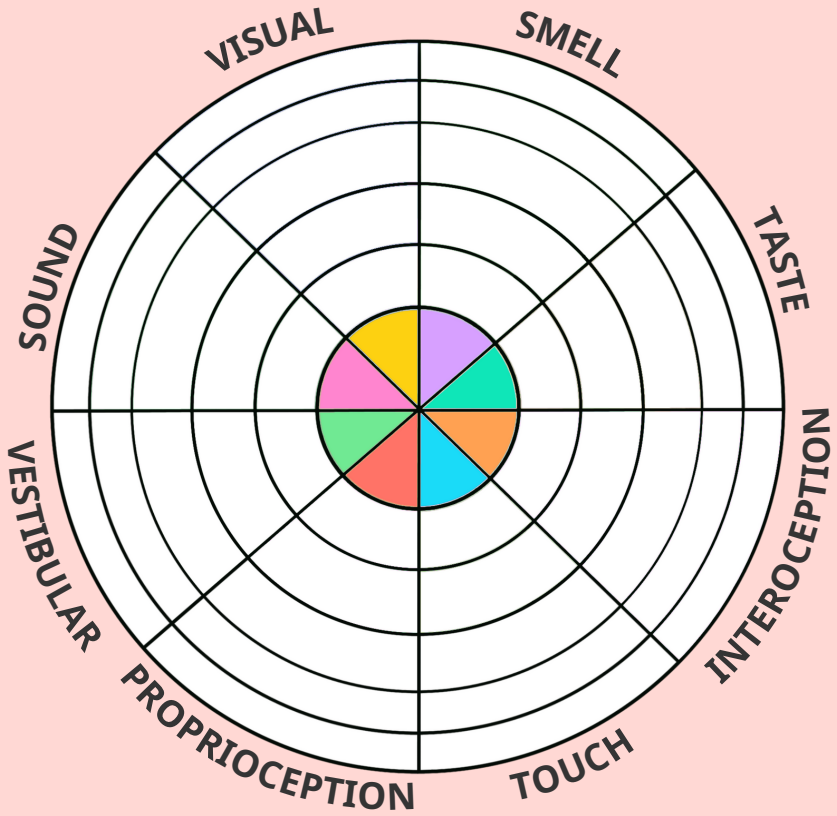
You can do this by filling in the sensory profile worksheets in the following pages and exploring ways to manage your sensory differences.

MY SENSORY PROFILE

FILL IN THE LEVEL OF HYPERSENSITIVITY YOU EXPERIENCE WITH EACH OF THE SENSES:



1 - no impact on my quality of life
2 - occasionally but minimal impact
3 - sometimes but easy to manage
4 - regularly interferes
5 - uses up all my spoons



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MY SENSORY PROFILE

You can use this worksheet to list your particular sensory differences and needs including hypersensitivities and hyposensitivites.

VISUAL

SMELL

SOUND

TASTE

PROPRIOCEPTION

(external body awareness)

TOUCH

VESTIBULAR

(sense of balance/movement)

INTEROCEPTION

(what's going on inside your body)

BUILD A SENSORY TOOLKIT

A sensory toolkit is something designed to help soothe and comfort you during times of distress or sensory overload.

Some tips to get you started:

Everyone is different, so ask yourself, "do I find this sensation pleasant or unpleasant? Comforting or uncomfortable?"

You might find you need different types of sensory items depending on the day and your sensory needs.

Keep the toolkit somewhere accessible because the idea is that you or anyone you live with can easily pull it out whenever you need it.

Consider keeping a set of instructions in the toolkit for your partner, loved one or even yourself.

VISUAL

ambient lighting like fairy lights
affirmation cards
kaleidoscope
glitter jar
light-up toys
bubbles

SOUNDS

noise-cancelling headphones
playlist with nature sounds
sound of your cat purring
white noise machine
audiobook

TOUCH

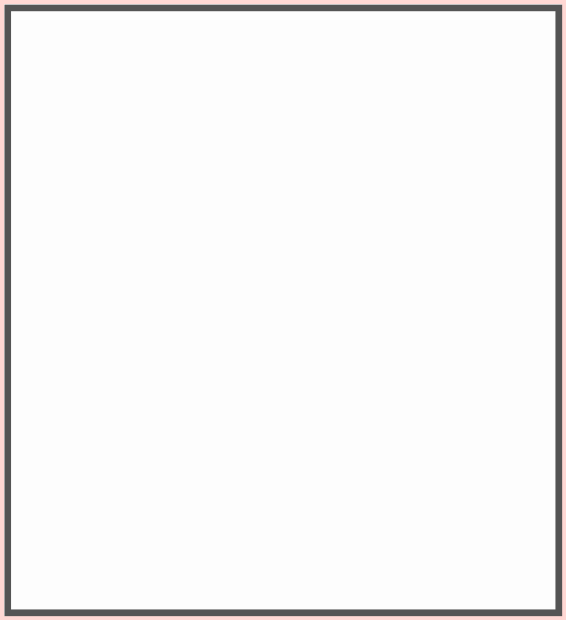
favourite soft toy
weighted blanket
play dough, slime
stress balls
wooden puzzles
bubble wrap

SMELL

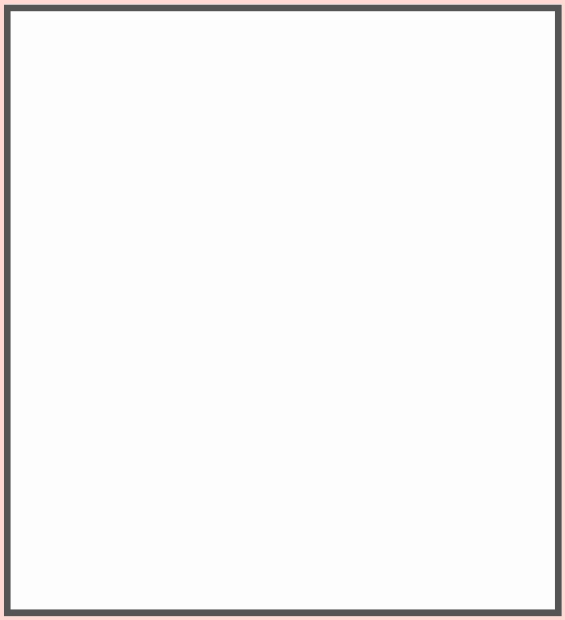
play-dough with a favourite scent
scented lotion
scented pillow
calming spray
scratch and sniff stickers

BUILD YOUR OWN SENSORY TOOLKIT

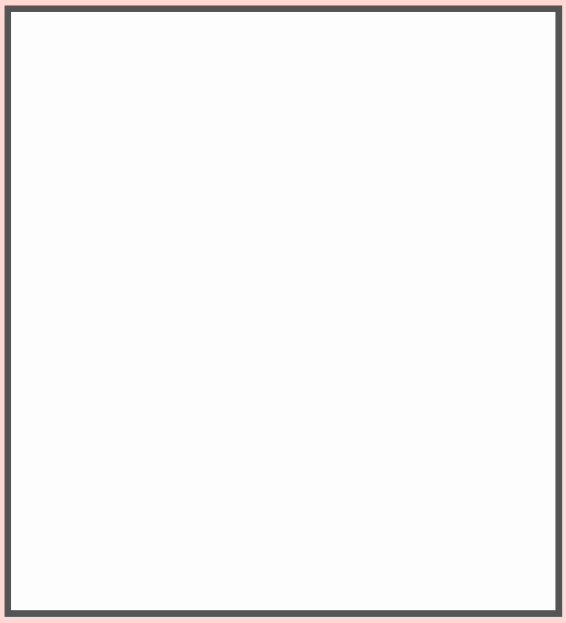
VISUAL
experiment with objects that are visually mesmerising or calming.



SOUNDS
what you might need may change depending on the day.



TOUCH
experiment with different textures and things to keep your hands busy



SMELL
do you have any smells associated with positive memories?