

◆◆◆ OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

SENSORY TEMPERAMENT – Sensory Sensitive

There are many children who are very sensitive to a variety of input around them. Not all sensory sensitive people are sensitive to all forms of input. Some people are extremely sensitive to sound and noise input, but not to other input such as touch or visual input. Others are very sensitive to touch or bright lights, while others are sensitive to activity and 'busy' environments. Many people who are sensory sensitive are not even aware of their differences, but just observe that certain environments bother them or that they become upset and agitated in certain environments. Some people do not seem as sensitive when they are in control or can anticipate something coming. When suddenly touched or surrounded by noise, however, a startle can be triggered which is not conscious and results in an automatic defensive response. For example, when a sensory sensitive child is bumped in a line, it is the same as if someone suddenly touched you while you were walking in a dark parking lot late at night - not a thought out response based on rules or expectations but a desperate attempt to protect oneself from attack.

Sensory sensitive people can be very particular about their environment, and rely heavily on routine and ritual to keep the environment predictable. If I always sit in the same place, the visual and auditory environments are likely to be more predictable. So for a sensory sensitive person, keeping things orderly and predictable may really help the person to feel calm and comfortable. If something is out of place, a sensory sensitive person will notice it and may need to fix it before moving on. A sensory sensitive person will do a task the same way each time, once taught. People who are sensory sensitive notice details that others would miss, so they are great to have around! People who are sensory sensitive tend to like things a little more mellow and a little more bland. Strong tastes and lots of activity can be upsetting. People with this profile tend to be different at home, where life is more quiet and predictable and they feel more in control. But at school or work, especially with lots of unpredictable children around, someone who needs calm predictability can be easily aroused and agitated. Using clear visual schedules and lists helps people to feel organized and helps make the environment more predictable, and these make it easier for the sensory sensitive person to function.

There are a lot of things sensory sensitive people can do to protect themselves from excessive input, and we should be able to support them with this. Some people find that wearing long or snug clothing helps the skin to not process light touch and temperature. Some people find that background noise helps them to not be bothered by other noises in the environment. Facing away from a window or sitting at a study carrel help to reduce excess visual input, as does wearing sunglasses or a visor/cap. Sensory input that has a calming influence on the nervous system often helps to lower levels of arousal, and may help sensory sensitive people. For example, wearing a weighted vest or weighted product often has a calming effect, and this is often clearly seen with the sensory sensitive child. Wearing the vest grounds and anchors the child, who begins to feel more safe and relaxed compared to always feeling on guard or unsafe. Using sensory calming options throughout the day can greatly increase the ability of a sensory sensitive person to function well.

Whatever one is sensitive to, one becomes even more sensitive to when stressed or agitated. Something which may not register as noxious when we are calm may grate on our nerves when

we are already on edge. If one is stressed and under pressure, smells, sights, sounds, may all seem more intense and harder to ignore. What bothers a sensory sensitive person one day may not be a problem another day, for many reasons. Variability in sensitivities is hallmark when people are in environments that they cannot control. This variability often leads to people being characterized as 'spoiled' or 'complainers'. It may be hard to understand how something that did not bother a person yesterday can bother him/her today until you can relate this to changing sensitivities in your own life. The bottom line is that we need to trust people and help them to learn what bothers them and keeps them from doing their work and then to help find solutions to these challenges.

Once overly aroused or agitated, sensory reduction may be necessary to help a sensory sensitive person feel calm and in control again. When one has become frazzled or agitated, finding a calm sensory retreat can be very important in helping a person learn to shift gears. For many people, changing environments and moving may be perfect, others may need more intense sensory reduction. Just taking a walk and delivering or picking up something may help to reduce the overwhelming sensory input. Once agitated, however, the sensory reduction may need to be more intense. Having a dimly lit area with calm music, cushions, pillows, can be very calming, especially with preferred activities such as books, cars, etc. Touch input can also be very calming and can be combined with sensory reduction to help a person regain a feeling of being calm and in control. Focusing on a motor task can help the person to stop thinking about the sources of stress and begin to feel calm again. Again, things like timers and visual schedules help to build in predictability, which is calming.

Some examples of environmental challenges that may be too much for a sensory sensitive child:

assemblies in large indoor spaces	cafeterias full of people
indoor recess	outdoor crowds
fire drills	in class free time/stations
doing written work when others are moving about	sitting next to a noise source
flickering lights or monitors	sun shining onto someone's face/desk
visual clutter	loud and sudden bells and alarms
cold plastic seats	sitting near a window with a busy view
hearing water/flushing in a washroom	singing out of key

Sensory calming may help a sensitive child to manage a challenging environment, or to recover from overload. Examples of sensory calming strategies include:

Sensory reduction (see above)	slow rocking, swinging, bouncing, walking
Weighted products	headphones/white noise
Deep pressure	deep tactile input
Calm, relaxing music	dim incandescent lights
Fish tanks, calming visual motion	fidget items to keep hands busy
Progressive muscle relaxation	breathing exercises

People who are sensory sensitive learn to notice all kinds of details in the environment. They can learn to be very exacting in their work, and they often do great with details. These people make great witnesses as they notice so much. Sensory sensitive people often thrive on routine and structure, and do well in environments where this is encouraged and respected.

In working with a sensory sensitive person, Considering the child's complete sensory profile is very helpful, as is consultation with an occupational therapist who has experience with sensory processing.