

## Problems with sensory needs in a person with ASD and strategies to address them.

### Sight (visual) system (Activated by light)

#### Hyper (over) sensitive

- May have distorted vision, e.g. objects and bright lights can appear to jump around.
- May find bright lights painful.
- Maybe easily distracted by tiny objects, busy wallpaper and wall decorations.
- May find it easy to focus on the detail rather than the whole object.
- Difficulty sleeping due to light sensitivity.
- Problems with eye contact and images may fragment.

#### What may help with hypersensitivity?

- Use diffused soft lighting.
- Remove fluorescent lighting if possible.
- Use dimmer switches.
- Use blinds or black-out curtains in bedrooms.
- Offer sunglasses.
- Create a workstation in the classroom.
- A space or desk with high walls or divides on both sides to block out visual distractions.

#### Hypo (under) sensitive

- Objects appear quite dark or lose some of their features.
- May use peripheral vision as central vision is blurred.
- The central object is magnified, but things on the periphery are blurred.
- Problems with depth perception.
- Difficulties with throwing and catching, leading to clumsiness.
- Unable to judge distances.
- May bang into things.

#### What may help with hyposensitivity?

- Use flickering lights or toys that stimulate the visual sensory system.
- Keep rooms brightly lit.
- The person may enjoy spinning objects. So, let them use toys with this function.

### Hearing (auditory) system (The most common sensory problem for individuals with ASD.)

#### Hyper (over) sensitive

- Sound appears louder.
- Sounds can be distorted and muddled.
- Unable to filter out background noises.
- May have difficulty concentrating.
- Sound can cause physical pain.
- Individuals can hear conversations in the distance.

### What may help with hypersensitivity?

- Ear plugs, and Ipad with familiar favourite music.
- Reduce noise with double-glazing and soft flooring, shutting doors and windows.
- Keep the volume down on the TV/music system.
- Do not have more than one switched on at a time.
- Prepare them before entering any noisy or crowded environment.
- Position the person away from doors and windows.
- Create a screened workstation in the classroom or the workplace.

### Hypo (under) sensitive

- May only hear in one ear.
- May not acknowledge particular sounds.
- May enjoy making their own noise.
- May enjoy particularly noisy places/activities.
- May bang doors and objects.

### What may help with hyposensitivity?

- Play music, keep the radio on in the background, sing together.
- Do not prevent them from humming or singing.
- Keep the volume of the TV up.
- Let the person use headphones to listen to music.
- Use visual supports to back up verbal information.
- Include enjoyable activities.

**Touch (tactile) sense** (Receptors on the skin surface detects pain, temperature, pressure.)

### Hyper (over) sensitive

- Light touch can be painful.
- Clothes can feel uncomfortable, especially new clothes.
- May only tolerate certain types of clothing or textures.
- Having hair brushed and washed can be difficult.
- Dislikes having anything on hands or feet.
- May find many food textures uncomfortable.

### What may help with hypersensitivity?

- Teach them to brush their hair/teeth themselves. So, they know when it is uncomfortable.
- Tell them when you are going to touch them.
- Always approach them from the front.
- Wash new clothes several times before wearing them and cut out 'scratchy' labels.
- Turn clothes inside out so there is no seam.
- Remember a hug may be distressing for them.
- Introduce different textures slowly.
- Allow to wear clothes they're comfortable in.

### Hypo (under) sensitive

- May have a high pain threshold, so may not feel pain.
- May squeeze or hold others too tightly.
- May indulge in self-injury.
- May squeeze into tight spaces.
- May enjoy heavy objects (e.g., weighted blankets) on top of them.
- May be unable to feel food in the mouth.
- May smear faeces as they enjoy the texture.
- Chews on everything, including clothing and inedible objects.

#### What may help with hyposensitivity?

- Weighted blankets or sleeping bags may help them sleep better.
- Weighted jackets.
- Body warmer snug fit.
- Neoprene suits.
- Massage.
- For smearing, offer alternative objects with similar textures like jelly, cornflour and water.
- For chewing, offer latex-free tubes, straws or hard sweets (chilled in the fridge).

**Taste (gustatory) system** (Receptors on the tongue detect sweet, sour, bitter, salty, hot and cold.)

#### Hyper (over) sensitive

- Finds some flavours and foods too strong and overpowering.
- May only eat bland foods.
- Has a restricted diet.
- May have problems with texture.
- May not eat crunchy or lumpy foods.
- May only eat soft foods like mashed potatoes.

#### What may help with hypersensitivity?

- Introduce food with a soft texture.
- Introduce different textures and tastes slowly.
- Do not make an issue at mealtime and try to relax.
- As long as the person has a balanced diet with various foods, this should not be a problem.

#### Hypo (under) sensitive

- May eat non-edibles such as soil, cigarette ends, and flowers (Pica).
- May like very strong tastes.
- May like spicy foods.

#### What may help with hyposensitivity?

- Give the person strong-tasting foods with different textures and foods they enjoy eating.
- If the food is unhealthy, e.g. sweet candies/fatty food, try replacing it with another food with the same texture and taste that is healthy.

## Smell (olfactory) system.

### Hyper (over) sensitive

- Finds certain smells overpowering. This may cause toileting problems.
- May become distressed at changes in perfumes, washing powders, etc.
- Dislikes people with distinctive perfumes, shampoos, etc.

### What may help with hypersensitivity?

- Use unscented detergents or shampoos.
- Avoid smelly food and smelly environments.
- Avoid wearing perfumes.
- Make the environment as fragrance-free as possible.

### Hypo (under) sensitive

- May have no sense of smell.
- May not notice strong odours.
- May be attracted to strong odours, leading to problems with smearing, etc.
- May lick objects.

### What may help with hyposensitivity?

- Have a stock of strong-smelling products, such as tuna, to act as motivators.
- Use strong-smelling activities such as cooking.
- Regularly wash and use strong-smelling products to distract people from inappropriate strong-smelling stimuli (like faeces).

## Balance (vestibular) system (crucial for maintaining our balance and posture)

### Hyper (over) sensitive

- Difficulties with activities like sports, where control of movements is needed.
- Difficulties with stopping, starting, and changing directions quickly.
- Car sickness.
- Difficulties with activities where the head is not upright or feet are off the ground.
- May have problems being in crowded/busy places if over-sensitive to movement.

### What may help with hypersensitivity?

- Break down activities into small, more easily manageable steps and use visual cues such as a finish line.

### Hypo (under) sensitive

- A need to rock, swing or spin to get some sensory input.

### What may help with hyposensitivity?

- Encourage activities to develop the vestibular system.

- Activities like rocking horses, swings, roundabouts, seesaws, catching a ball or practising walking smoothly up steps or curbs.

**Body awareness (proprioception) system** (Positioned in deep muscles and joints)

Hyper (over) sensitive

- Problems with writing, tying shoelaces, doing up buttons, etc.
- Moves whole body to look at something.

What may help with hypersensitivity?

- Any activity to help with fine motor skills like threading, lacing, etc.

Hypo (under) sensitive

- May invade other's space.
- Find it difficult to go around the obstacles and furniture in the room.
- May bump into people and objects.
- May lean against others.

What may help with hyposensitivity?

- Position furniture around the edge of the room.
- Keep floors clear.
- Teach body awareness and appropriate space etc.