

Sensory differences

Below is a quote from possibly the most famous autistic person alive today- Temple Grandin (from a book called *The Way I See It*).

For me and other people on the autism spectrum, sensory experiences that have little or no effect on neurotypical people can be severe life stressors for us. Loud noises hurt my ears like a dentist's drill hitting a nerve. For some individuals, the seams in a pair of socks or the rough texture of materials like wool can feel like being constantly burned. This explains why a child's reaction is to take them off- he's not being defiant; the socks are physically hurting him. For others, even the light touch of another's hand on their arm can be painful. They shrink away from people not because they are antisocial, but because even brushing up against another person can feel like razors across their skin.

I think so many professionals and non-professionals have ignored sensory issues because they just can't imagine that an alternate sensory reality exists if they have not experienced it personally. They simply cannot imagine it, so it does not register in their minds. That type of narrow perception, however, does nothing to help individuals who do have these very real issues in their lives. Even if they don't understand it on a personal level, it's time they put aside their personal ideas. Scientific research has now documented that sensory problems are real. [Autistic people] are writing about their sensory issues in great detail. Many of these individuals agree that sensory issues are the primary challenge of autism in their daily lives.

One of the problems in understanding sensory issues is that sensory sensitivities are very variable, among individuals and within the same individual. A person can be hyper-sensitive in one area (like hearing) and hypo-sensitive in another (like touch). One person can have a marked smell sensitivity, and another might not be affected at all. Complicating matters even further, on a day-to-day basis, in the same individual, the sensory sensitivities can change, especially when the person is tired or stressed.

There are two ways a child can respond to sensory overload: withdraw and shut off the world or scream and yell. Some children who appear to be non-responsive are actually in sensory shutdown due to sensory overload.

Auditory challenges are often cited as the number one sensory challenge among autistic individuals. There are two kinds of auditory problems: 1) sensitivity to loud noises in general and 2) not being able to hear auditory detail, such as discerning one voice among other sounds, or hearing hard consonant sounds of words. An auditory sensitivity to noises, where sounds hurt the ears, can be extremely debilitating. Sounds sensitivity can make it *impossible* for some people on the spectrum to tolerate normal places such as restaurants, offices, and sports events. These extreme auditory problems can occur in both nonverbal individuals and those with marked intelligence and language capabilities, such as college-educated people.