

PFA Tips

Signs and Symptoms of Sensory Processing Disorder

Admit it. You've found yourself at a Chuck-E-Cheese birthday party and wanted to run out amidst the chaos. Now imagine a 24/7 assault on your senses. I've previously tried to help people understand behaviors from sensory overload by presenting this scenario: *Imagine putting a desk inside the Harbor Tunnel during rush hour. About 40 feet away from the desk stands a teacher who is going to orally give you algebraic word problems to complete. How long would you be able to sit there with the flashing lights and thunderous sounds of the cars racing by? And how well would you do on those algebra problems?*

Sensory Processing Disorder goes beyond simply not liking a smell or thinking a noise might be loud. Sensory Processing Disorder can impede daily life functioning, learning, and socializing.

What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

Sensory Processing Disorder is a neurological disorder that results from the brain's inability to integrate certain information received from the body's basic sensory systems. Sensory processing refers to our ability to take in information through our senses (touch, smell, taste, vision, and hearing), organize and interpret that information, and make a meaningful response. In addition to those five senses we are all familiar with, we also have proprioception (our body awareness) and our vestibular sense (movement and balance).

Sensory Processing Disorder is its own diagnosis - it is not a characteristic of Autism (although many individuals with Autism also have Sensory Processing Disorder).

What are the signs of Sensory Processing Disorder?

For someone that experiences **hypersensitivity**, they may:

- react strongly to loud noises,
- squint or cover their eyes even if others around them do not think it is bright,
- refuse to wear certain clothing or fabrics because they feel itchy or painful or just don't feel right,
- be distracted by stimuli others don't notice,
- be clumsy or have difficulty with body awareness

For someone who experiences **hyposensitivity**, they may:

- be constantly craving sensory input
- intentionally bang their body against walls or objects
- seek activities that produce deep pressure like push-ups or extra tight hugs
- appear to constantly be in motion
- have no sense of personal space when around others

What does sensory overload look like?

Sensory input is different for each



person. It's important that we be able to recognize when someone is having a sensory meltdown and that we identify the triggers and implement calming methods and techniques. For some individuals, sensory overload prompts a fight or flight response. The person may become aggressive, or they may run away to escape an over stimulating environment. For someone else, the response may be to simply shut down.

A sensory meltdown cannot be treated as a behavioral issue

There is a difference between a meltdown and a tantrum. A tantrum is an outburst by a child as an attempt to get what he wants. A meltdown is a reaction to sensory overload and it cannot be controlled by the person. Discipline will have no bearing or

continued on back

SPD Signs and Symptoms – cont.



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impact on sensory meltdowns, neither the current meltdown nor future ones.

If the person is actively experiencing a sensory meltdown:

First, remove the offending stimuli to create a calmer environment. If you cannot remove the trigger, take the person to a calm space. Some individuals may find comfort in spaces with low lighting, under blankets or inside tents. Some people may respond well to certain music while others may prefer silence. Try to keep your own voice and actions calm. Deep pressure can be calming for some individuals because it stimulates release of serotonin which has a natural calming effect. Deep pressure can be obtained from activities such as push-ups (on the floor, a chair or against a wall), lifting heavy objects, pushing/pulling heavy objects, climbing

and hanging from monkey bars. Crawling under weighted blankets, wearing weighted vests or setting a weighted object on the lap can also produce the effect.

Movement can be a calming strategy as well. Activities could include swinging on a swing or hammock, rocking in a rocking chair, jumping up and down or on a trampoline, bouncing on a large exercise ball, playing on a sit-n-spin, going down a slide, or running.

Keep in mind techniques that work to calm one person may trigger an adverse effect for another. An occupational therapist would be able to help identify the most effective strategies for your loved one.

Additional Resources

PFA Tips: Strategies for Sensory Processing Disorder

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/articles/treatments-therapies/strategies-for-sensory-processing-disorder>

Pathfinders for Autism Online Provider Database

<http://pathfindersforautism.org/providers-services/>

Choose category > Sensory products and toys

Choose category > Therapies > Occupational Therapist

Sensory Processing Issues Fact Sheet

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/sensory-processing-issues-fact-sheet>

“The Out-of-Sync Child Series” by Carol Kranowitz available on Amazon

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