

Introduction to Sensory Processing

Our senses act as a window to the world and are key in helping us make sense of the world around us.

Our main senses include:

- Vision
- Auditory (hearing)
- Olfactory (smell)
- Gustatory (taste)
- Proprioception (body awareness)
- Vestibular (balance)
- Interoception (internal state of the body)

Put simply Sensory Processing refers to the way the nervous system receives messages from our senses and turns them into responses. This may sound straight forward, but in reality our sensory systems are highly complex. Sensory processing can be very variable from one day to the next and can change depending on many factors including things like mood and the environment.

Sensory stimuli is detected by the sensory receptors located all over the body. These receptors pass the information they receive to the brain. The brain is like a computer, filled with thousands of wires connecting. They help us process, interpret and then choose the actions we take. Sensory processing is reliant on this mechanism working effectively, if this is not the case, a person can easily feel overwhelmed, anxious and distressed. This is the case for many autistic people.

Some people are labelled 'not sensitive enough', and can often be referred to as being under responsive or hyposensitive to sensations such as textures of food; certain smells, physical movement or body temperature. They might actively seek sensations through chewing non-food items, fidgeting, being constantly "on the go" or wearing winter clothing on a hot summer's day. Some people are labelled too sensitive or hypersensitive to stimuli meaning that they can constantly be in a state of high alert, anticipating the next sensory assault to happen.

It is important to understand that people can be a mixture of both hyper and hypo sensitive within specific senses - at the same time. So for example you may seek out the noise of a vacuum but avoid with fear the noise of a high-pitched fire engine.

It is important to understand that sensory differences impact on every aspect



of life, and hypersensitivities are much more than just a dislike for a certain stimuli.

It is vital that you understand the sensory profile and be respectful of how it feels for the person concerned.

