

Our Sensory Selves

Hello and welcome to this discovery session, where we're exploring our sensory selves.

In this video, we'll introduce the idea that each of us experiences the world through a unique sensory system, and how for Autistic people, these sensory experiences often shape our emotions, our energy, our well-being, and our sense of safety in profound ways.

During our live session, you'll have the chance to reflect more on your own sensory profile and what helps you feel more comfortable, more regulated, and more at ease.

As humans, we take in information through our senses all the time—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. They're usually the ones that we think about first, but we also have important internal senses: balance and movement, body awareness, and our sense of what's happening inside our body.

Together, these systems help us understand where we are, what's happening around us, and what we might need.

For many Autistic people, sensory experiences could be more intense or muted, more detailed, more unpredictable, or simply different to others.

Some sounds might feel painfully loud. Certain lights may flicker in ways others barely even notice.

Textures, smells, or tastes can be overwhelming, while at the same time, some sensations can be deeply soothing, grounding, or joyful.

You might already know some of your own patterns. Perhaps busy supermarkets, sudden noises, or being touched when you're overwhelmed can feel too much. Perhaps there are sensory experiences that bring you comfort or pleasure:

- the weight of a heavy blanket,
- the rhythm of rocking,
- the smell of rain or freshly cut grass,
- the sound of waves,
- the warmth of sunlight,
- or the softness of a favourite fabric.

What soothes one person might overwhelm another. There is no right or normal sensory profile. Each of us is different, and each of our sensory systems has been shaped over time by our bodies, our environments, and our life experiences.

Alongside the five senses that we're most familiar with, there are three internal ones that are especially important to understand our experiences.

The vestibular system helps us sense movement and balance. It tells us if we're upright, spinning, falling, or still.

The proprioceptive system gives us information about where our body is in space through our muscles and our joints. That's why activities like stretching, pushing, carrying weight, or rocking might feel calming or organising for many of us. These systems work together like an internal map, helping us feel oriented and grounded.

The interoceptive system helps us notice what's happening inside our body—hunger, thirst, pain, temperature, tiredness, needing the toilet, and also those physical sensations that are linked to our emotions.

Many Autistic people find this system harder to understand. We might not notice these signals until they become very strong, or we might misinterpret them or miss them completely due to how our attention is being directed.

Hunger might feel like nausea for some. Anxiety might show up as a stomach ache or a headache. Tiredness might not be recognised until suddenly we are exhausted or we're hit with a migraine.

Interoception is also closely linked with emotional awareness. When combined with what's known as alexithymia, which is the difficulty identifying and naming feelings, it can be hard to know what we're feeling or what our body is signalling. It's a different way that our nervous system processes information.

All of these systems are constantly interacting with our body and mind and environment. They play a huge role in helping us feel settled and safe, able to think and connect, or pushing us towards overwhelm and distress when there might be too much, too little, or the wrong kind of input.

Our sensory thresholds are not fixed. Some of us may be more sensitive in certain areas and less in others. The patterns can also change depending on factors such as stress, fatigue, trauma, or how safe we feel in certain places or with certain people.

If earlier in our lives our needs were often ignored, or we were told that we were too sensitive or too much or not trying hard enough, we may have learned to tune out our body signals or push past them. Over time, this can lead to chronic stress and exhaustion, as our bodies and systems have been working very hard to adapt.

Sometimes we might look calm on the outside while our body is still in a state of sensory overload. Underneath, this hidden effort can build up over time and contribute to meltdowns, shutdowns, burnout, or other mental and physical health difficulties.

Burnout is not a personal failure. It's a sign that we've been trying to cope for too long without enough support, rest, or sensory safety.

The hopeful part is that when we begin to understand our sensory profile, we can start to support ourselves with more compassion, notice earlier when our volume dial is getting too high or too low, and start to build small, practical ways of helping our bodies feel safer.

We might do something like create a sensory toolkit, which is a collection of things, activities, or reminders that help us to regulate. This could be movement, pressure, quiet music, familiar smells, or comfortable clothing; stimming; the calm presence of someone you trust; or time with activities that you love.

In our live session, we'll explore these ideas together. We'll look at all of the sensory systems and reflect with you on what soothes you, what energises you, and what overwhelms you, and we'll begin thinking about what might help you feel more supported in life.

Learning to tune into your own sensory needs can become a powerful form of self-understanding and self-care.

We hope, through the session, you'll discover a deeper understanding of yourself and gain clarification about your ways of being, your strengths and challenges, and how your sensory system has impacted your own sense of identity.

We'll also share more resources for you to look more in depth at this topic as you move forward.

Bye for now.