



Humber Sensory Processing Service

Community Services for Children
aged 0-18 years



Sensory processing and anxiety

Sensory processing differences and anxiety are often closely linked. For some people, certain environments and everyday situations can be overwhelming for both the brain and body. This can make daily activities, learning, and social interactions more challenging. It can also affect how a person feels and impact their emotional wellbeing.

People with sensory processing differences can often feel anxious. **Sensory overload** occurs when there's suddenly too much information coming in for the brain to process, our senses become overstimulated, and this can make us feel anxious or overwhelmed. When this happens, it can trigger our fight, flight, freeze response and cause an increase in anxiety.

People may worry about when or where their senses will get flooded and how they'll escape. There are strategies that can help regulate the senses and that have a calming effect on the body and brain.

Anxiety is an important feeling and isn't always bad. Anxiety can motivate us in certain situations, help us stay alert and focused, plan ahead, and help us avoid risky situations.

Anxiety without sensory processing differences

Sensory processing differences are often present from a young age and can contribute to increased anxiety. However, anxiety on its own can also affect sensory thresholds, making it appear as though someone has a sensory processing difference.

In these situations, general calming and regulating sensory strategies may be helpful. As anxiety reduces, you would usually expect sensory sensitivities to reduce as well. It can be helpful to think about what triggers your anxiety and whether there are any changes or adaptations you can make to better manage it.



When I'm anxious; sounds get louder, smells get stronger, lights get brighter, and everything seems way more overwhelming.

Helpful strategies

- Think about when you feel anxious and about what is going on in the environment around you. Think about what sensory stimuli you find overwhelming, such as bright lights, loud noises, or certain textures. Once you know what you dislike, it is easier for you and those around you such as family/ teachers to accommodate your needs. This may include using noise-cancelling headphones or ear loops, adjusting lighting, or creating quiet spaces where you can retreat when feeling overwhelmed.
- Consistent routines can provide a sense of predictability and security, helping to reduce anxiety. Visual schedules and regular daily routines and planners can be particularly helpful. Please see sensory processing routine and predictability in the resources section.
- Engaging in physical activity can be helpful for sensory regulation. Participating in activities that you enjoy, such as dancing, sports or yoga or heavy work activities, such as carrying heavy bags/ weights/ wall push-ups. Creating a personalised activity plan



that provides the sensory input you need through the day can help regulate sensory processing.

- A weighted blanket can be calming and weighted clothing such as a weighted hoodie is a discreet way of using weight during the day.
- A compression shirt is a discreet way of providing deep pressure throughout the day. Other alternatives include sports clothing or skins.
- Deep pressure input is calming on the body – try sitting under a heavy or weighted blanket, tucking your legs up to your chest and squeezing.
- Try placing your hands on your head and pushing down, using joint compressions, or giving yourself a firm massage as ways of providing deep pressure.
- Techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness and progressive muscle relaxation can help manage anxiety.
- Sensory tools, such as fidget toys, noise cancelling headphones, or stress balls can be an easy way to relieve stress and anxiety when out and about. Other things such as chewing gum or sucking a drink from a sports bottle can also help regulate.
- When out and about, consider keeping an item in your pocket that is of a preferred texture for you to feel and hold when needed; this could be a tactile fidget item or something like a smooth stone, or soft keyring charm.
- If you are sensitive to certain smells, consider applying a preferred scent on your sleeve or collar to override unwanted smells. You could use perfume/ deodorant/ essential oils* etc.
- ‘Feel-good’ movement activities can include jogging/ running, jumping jacks, stamping on the spot, stretching etc.
- Sucking boiled sweets or eating chewy/ crunch foods can have a regulating effect on the body. You could try sucking yoghurt or a thick milkshake through a straw or drinking a cold drink through a sports bottle. You can try including snacks/ drinks like this throughout the day as part of your routine.



* There can be risks using essential oils – please read the instructions and make sure you use sparingly.



For more advice and strategies like this, you can visit our website:
<https://connect.humber.nhs.uk/service/humber-sensory-processing-hub/home/>

Or you can contact us with a question on the email address below:
hnf-tr.humbersensoryprocessingservice@nhs.net

