

Fact Sheet on Sensory Processing Differences - Understanding Neurological Difference

It's estimated that approximately 10% of the population has a significant issue with being overly sensitive to sensory experiences. This sensitivity impacts how we are able to function and adapt to the environment and people around us. For those among us who have sensory defensiveness, many sensory experiences are overly annoying at best and are often experienced as overwhelming, painful, frightening, or worse.

Many with specific diagnoses like Autism Spectrum Disorders, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or those who have suffered physical and sexual abuse, have difficulty tolerating sensory experiences. Many others with and without such diagnoses also are affected by difficulty in processing sensory experiences in a positive way. Others with conditions such as arthritis and fibromyalgia often experience pain when touched by others through typical actions such as handshakes or hugs. Sensory defensiveness can occur in one or more sensory categories such as touch, sound, sight, smell, or motion.

Just like some of us have better vision or hearing than others, some of us process sensory experiences better than others. You can't "will" yourself to see or hear better. Those with sensory processing issues can't "will" themselves to tolerate sensory experiences better. We can't just "get over it" or ignore it.

Here are some ways some of us perceive various sensory experiences:

- Touch can seem like a physical attack.
- A sudden noise can feel like extreme danger.
- A specific smell can elicit gagging, nausea, or vomiting.
- Bright or flashing lights can be painful and lead to agitation and headaches, or trigger seizures.
- Certain movements can be very frightening, causing fear responses.
- A flight of steps can seem like the edge of a cliff.

What happens is the sensory experiences are received by the part of the brain that helps us respond in ways that keep us safe. These experiences trigger our flight or fight system and we either run (or want to run) or we get ready to fight and defend ourselves.

For children this can look like "bad behavior" when what is really happening to them is unpleasant at best and scary, painful, and/or dangerous at worst.

For adults who try to cope and function in spite of their sensory processing issues it can take a great toll. Being on edge, irritable, developing headaches, nervousness, and avoiding social settings, are just a few of the ongoing responses that have to be managed on a daily basis of just living our lives.

Our churches can help if we understand that this is a very real disability. Church members can:

- Be accepting of those with increased sensitivities to sensory experiences.
- Ask before initiating touch: "Can I give you a hug?" or "Can I shake your hand?"
- Ask adults with disabilities or parents of children with sensitivities what the church can do to make it a safe place for them or their children to be a part of.
- Offer alternatives in your worship services or other activities for those who need to move around, have decreased noise, light, or activity, or need more personal space to feel safe.
- Ask for help from the Conference Disability Concerns Team.