

SENSORY STRATEGIES FOR EMOTION REGULATION



Many neurodivergent people have trouble with sensory dysregulation, which means feeling overwhelmed when there is too much or too little sensory input. Sensory dysregulation can be very hard to deal with. It can feel uncomfortable, intense, confusing, or even painful. But the effects of sensory dysregulation don't just happen in the moment—they can also affect a person's life in bigger ways.

Sensory dysregulation can affect our emotions. When your body feels overwhelmed with too many sensations or craves more sensations, it is difficult to manage your emotions. Managing your sensory experience can help you to manage your emotions as well.

This guide will explain how our sensory systems work and give you strategies and tips for using your senses to help manage your emotions.

WHY SENSORY STRATEGIES?



EMOTIONS HAPPEN IN YOUR BODY

All of us experience emotions through our bodies: when you're angry, your muscles clench. When you're sad, you cry. We can use our senses to impact what our body is doing, which will in turn impact our emotions. In addition, sensory input is the most direct way we have of impacting our experience of the world.



YOUR SENSES ALERT YOU TO DANGER

One of the most important ways we use our senses is to tell us if we are safe. When our senses are dysregulated, we feel unsafe. Our emotions react to the feeling of danger. In order to help your body and mind feel calm, you need to regulate your senses or they will continue to alert you that something is wrong.



INTEROCEPTION CHALLENGES

Many autistic individuals struggle to know what they are experiencing in their body, and may be tired, hungry, thirsty, overheated, etc. without realizing it. Sensory strategies help to address these issues, which creates a more solid foundation for emotion regulation.



SENSORY REGULATION IS THE FOUNDATION OF ALL OTHER REGULATION

Emotion regulation is a higher level thinking skill. In order to engage those parts of our brain, we need to feel regulated on all the more foundational levels. If I am hungry, tired, cold, in pain, or some other physical sensation, it will be much harder to regulate my emotions because I am using energy and thought to manage the more basic sensations. The same is true of sensory regulation.



TRADITIONAL EMOTION REGULATION MISSES AUTISTIC NEEDS

Many traditional therapies rely on noticing our thoughts and challenging the ones that don't make sense. Noticing and understanding emotions can be challenging for autistics, but in addition, autistics experience unique challenges that are real and need to be addressed rather than having their distress questioned. Many autistics also tend to overthink emotions (especially when our emotions look different from the neurotypical majority). Sensory strategies bypass all the overthinking by engaging the body instead.





THE SENSORY SYSTEMS

Most people are familiar with the five basic senses, but we actually have eight sensory systems. This page will give you an overview of all the sensory systems and give you an idea of what sensory dysregulation can be.



VISUAL

What you see. This includes light, color, patterns, and shapes.



AUDITORY (HEARING)

What you hear, including the pitch, volume, frequency, beat, and tone.



OLFACTORY (SMELL)

What you smell. This sense is closely related to the gustatory system.



GUSTATORY (TASTE)

What you taste. This is deeply influenced by smell. Many people also have intense reactions to the texture of food.



TACTILE (TOUCH)

This is the experience of touching things: texture, pressure, temperature, and more.



PROPRIOCEPTIVE

This is your sense of your body in space, especially your sense of pressure. [Click here to learn more.](#)



VESTIBULAR

Your vestibular system controls your sense of balance and movement. [Click here to learn more about it.](#)



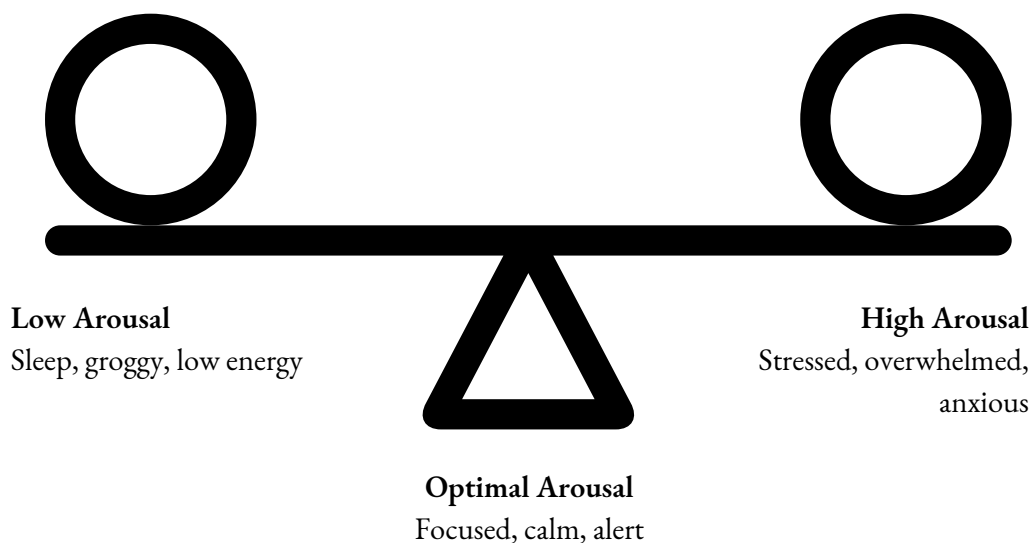
INTEROCEPTIVE

Your awareness of internal experiences in your body, like hunger, thirst, or illness. [Click here to learn more.](#)

Sensory dysregulation happens when someone gets too much or too little input from one or more of their senses. Many autistic people are hypo-sensitive (under-sensitive and needing a lot of stimulation) or hyper-sensitive (overly-sensitive and needing less stimulation) to sensory input. Any person can have a mix of needs across different sensory systems: for example they may be hypersensitive to visual stimulation and hyposensitive to vestibular input. No two people have the same sensory needs, so it can take some exploration to find what your own sensory needs are.

AROUSAL LEVEL

One essential role that our sensory systems play is to help us regulate our arousal level. Arousal means how alert/energetic you are. Different situations might require different levels of arousal: if you're working out, you probably want high arousal. If you're trying to get ready for bed, you want low arousal.



AROUSAL, SENSORY INPUT, AND EMOTION REGULATION

So what does this have to do with sensory strategies and emotion regulation? Your level of arousal impacts your emotions. If your arousal level is very high, it can make emotions feel very intense and lead to anxiety or stress. If your level of arousal is very low, you might feel disengaged or uninterested, which can turn into sadness or depression. Part of regulating your emotions is regulating your arousal. One of the best ways to do that is by changing the sensory input you're experiencing. Some sensory experiences will increase your arousal, like a splash of cold water or exercise. Others will lower your arousal, like deep pressure or having a warm bath.

[See a list of sensory arousal strategies here.](#)

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE WHEN YOU'RE REGULATED?

It may be hard to notice when you're in optimal arousal. It will look a little bit different for everyone. Notice when you feel regulated and see if you can identify what is happening in your body and brain. Here are some indicators that you're at the right level of arousal:

1. It feels easy to focus and engage with what you're doing.
2. You can handle new or different sensory inputs more easily, and you seek out sensory experiences that you like.
3. You can adjust the way you respond to new inputs.
4. Your emotional state feels relatively stable.

All of these indicators will be impacted by autism, so notice each of them in comparison to what is "normal" for you.



BASIC STRATEGIES

No matter who you are, or what your sensory profile looks like, there are a few basic strategies that will help you with your sensory and emotion regulation. These are also some of the most foundational strategies and are a great place to start if you're dysregulated.

MEET YOUR BASIC NEEDS

Your body is at the center of both your emotions and your senses, which means that the most foundational piece of regulating both of those areas is your body. Start with the most basic elements: feed yourself regularly, get enough sleep, stay hydrated, move your body regularly, and take your meds as they're prescribed. If you notice that you're getting dysregulated, check and see if you need to do any of those things.



TAKE SENSORY BREAKS

It's easy to forget about our sensory needs during the day. We all have a lot going on, and thinking about pausing to notice our senses and regulate them is not always priority number one. Scheduling in time to check in with your senses, go somewhere you find comfortable for your senses, and take a break, is an easy way to start regulating your senses. You'll probably find you notice your emotions more during these times as well. That awareness will help you get better at regulating your emotions.



GET TO KNOW YOURSELF

Since every person has different sensory needs, you won't know what your sensory profile looks like until you take some time to observe it. One helpful tool is a checklist. Here are two options you can use to think through your sensory preferences. As you get to know what you like and dislike, you can also start to notice how that affects your emotions. What happens if you have to deal with loud noises? How do you feel? What happens in your body? What happens if you don't get deep pressure? What does your body do to get the need met? You may want to jot down some notes to help you remember.





TYPES OF STRATEGIES

To make it easier for you to think about what sensory strategies you want to use, we've broken them into categories. You may want to focus on one category at a time, or maybe think about one strategy from each category at a time. Use these categories how you want!



ENVIRONMENTAL

Environmental strategies are things you can do to make your day to day sensory experience more comfortable. It might be making adjustments to your home, bringing sensory items to work or school, or changing where you go each day so that you avoid sensory triggers.



SELF AWARENESS

If you can't tell when you're getting overwhelmed, what causes you distress, or what helps you calm down, it's nearly impossible to know when and how to use your strategies. You can work on mindfulness and self-awareness to learn how to notice what impacts you and in what way.



PROACTIVE

Proactive strategies are things you do to keep yourself from getting overwhelmed. It might be incorporating positive sensory input into your day to day life, giving yourself breaks, or investing in tools to minimize negative sensory input.



RESPONSIVE

Sometimes things go wrong even when we've done everything else right. This is where reactive strategies come in: what can you do when you're getting overwhelmed or having a meltdown?

ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES



EXAMPLES



Create a Comfortable Space: for autistic folks, most of the world can be overwhelming on our senses. When you need to regulate your emotions, it's incredibly helpful to be in a space that feels safe and calm. Brainstorm the kinds of things that make you feel good in your body. What sensory experiences are positive for you? What kind of furniture, lighting, sound, colors, smells, etc. might this space have? It may take you time to create this space, but you can start small. Maybe it's simply your own bed to start with. When you are overwhelmed, you can retreat to that space. Try to take some time in your comfortable place every day or every few days to stay regulated.



Think With All Your Senses: When setting up your space or making changes, try to think about all your senses and the things that can affect them. This might include the lighting, colors, clutter, furniture, the texture of fabrics, things that smell, noise dampening elements or things that produce noise, weighted blankets or items. There are endless options: don't be afraid to get creative when you have identified a sensory need. Predictability can also be important—having a routine or visual reminders can help you feel more in control and less overwhelmed.



Give Yourself Room to Move: Sometimes, moving your body can help you release strong emotions. Do you have a place where you can move around freely when you need to? Especially if you are sensory-seeking, you may find that you want big movement like hanging upside down, spinning, jumping, or rocking. Are there places at home, work, or school where you can do this? You could add a chair that rocks, a trampoline, a hammock, or anything else that lets you move the way your body wants.



Remove Irritations: Are there things in your everyday environment that regularly irritate you? It could be something like bright overhead lights, a specific noise someone makes, or being asked to eat something that bothers you. If you notice these things, think about how you can remove or adjust them. Maybe you can bring a small desk lamp to your office and keep overhead lights off. You might choose non-scented shampoo if smells bother you. Or maybe you invest in a pair of earplugs to dampen difficult sounds.



Choose Your Spaces: if a particular place is hard on your senses, ask yourself if you really need to go there. Maybe you only order takeout from that restaurant instead of dining in person, or you ask if you can work from home more often. If a particular intersection is overwhelming to you, try finding a different route to drive. Some spaces can't be avoided, but when you have a choice, remember that you don't need to force yourself to fit in every space: it's ok to not like certain places.

AWARENESS STRATEGIES



EXAMPLES



Create Your Own Sensory Profile: Everyone has different sensory preferences and needs. Creating a sensory profile means figuring out what works best for you. Do certain sounds calm you, while others irritate you? Do you feel more focused after a snack, or does it make you sleepy? You can find example checklists [here](#) and [here](#) to get you started. Knowing your own preferences will help you plan ahead and anticipate what will feel good to you or what will be challenging for you.



Identify How Emotions Feel in Your Body: A key part of managing your emotions is recognizing how they feel in your body. This is a huge sensory experience, and especially if you struggle with interoception it can be hard. Take some time to notice what happens when you feel different emotions. For example, does your heart race when you're anxious? Do your muscles tense up when you're angry? Improving your interoception and connecting it to emotions will help you notice when your emotions are getting intense and when you need to use regulation strategies. For ideas of how to improve interoception, [check out this workbook](#).



Practice Mindfulness: Mindfulness techniques like deep breathing exercises or guided meditation can help you become more aware of your body and emotions. While many neurodivergent people struggle with mindfulness, there are ways to improve your mindfulness that are neurodivergent-friendly. The basic concept of mindfulness is simply being present: you are not thinking of the past or the future, about things or people that aren't there, or about worries or concerns. The goal is to notice what is happening around you and in your body. This will help you get better at noticing what your body and emotions are doing so that you can use the right skills to regulate. In general, neurodivergent folks do best with mindfulness that includes a task. If you're looking for some ideas, there are great options [here](#) and [here](#).



Track Your Emotions: Another way to get better at noticing what emotions you're feeling and how they show up in your body is to regularly track them. There are apps that can help with this, you can download printable mood trackers, or you can [create your own](#). By taking time every day to think about what you have felt and how you know that you felt it, you're getting better at identifying emotions and you may notice trends or patterns: what sensory experiences help you feel more regulated? Which ones dysregulate you?

PROACTIVE STRATEGIES



EXAMPLES



Keep a List of What Works: It can be helpful to keep a list of things that make you feel good and help you stay calm. This list can include activities, objects, or places that you know help you feel regulated. Whenever you feel overwhelmed, you can refer to this list to remind yourself of what works for you. A great place to start is by reviewing [lists of suggestions](#) and noting which ones sound good to you.



Create a Sensory Toolkit: Another proactive strategy is to put together a sensory toolkit or bag that you can carry with you. This toolkit might include items that help you feel calm and focused, like a stress ball, noise-canceling headphones, or a favorite snack. You might have one that you bring when you go out, another that you keep in your car, or items that you keep in places you visit regularly like school or work. Get some ideas [here](#).



Ask for Help with Co-Regulation: Sometimes, you might need help from someone else to regulate your emotions. This is called co-regulation, where another person helps you feel calm and balanced. It's not just something adults do for children—adults help each other all the time. Think about a time when a friend or family member was upset, and you gave them a hug or listened to them vent. These are examples of co-regulation. Take some time to think about people you trust and who might help you co-regulate. Then think about what helps you: do you want someone to help you with solutions? Just listen? Give you a hug? Check [this link](#) for ideas.



Use Sensory Circuits: Sensory circuits are activities designed to help you stay regulated throughout the day. They involve moving through a series of sensory experiences that help wake up your body, calm it down, or keep it focused. These circuits might include activities like jumping, squeezing a stress ball, or listening to calming music. By regularly doing a sensory circuit, you can keep your emotions more balanced and avoid feeling overwhelmed. After you have identified your sensory profile, think about what activities will help in each area. Write down 5-6 and use them to create a sensory circuit.



Use A Sensory Schedule: A sensory schedule is a way to organize the sensory input you need each day to stay regulated, then plan ahead for when and how you'll meet each need. They don't have to be rigid, but they can help you stay organized like a planner. Write down the different strategies you want to use. Then break your day down into a few time frames (morning, lunch, afternoon, dinner, evening, bedtime as an example). Think especially about times that you get dysregulated. Then add a sensory strategy or two to each timeframe. Try to match your energy level and mood to the right strategy. Once you try it out, you can always make adjustments. We have a guide to Sensory Schedules [here](#). Some examples can be found [here](#).

REACTIVE STRATEGIES



EXAMPLES



Find a Calm Place: Oftentimes, when our emotions feel dysregulated, we may be experiencing sensory input from the world around us that isn't helping. When you get overwhelmed, it can be helpful to leave the space you're in and go to a place you feel safe and comfortable. This could be a room with dim lighting, a quiet corner, or even stepping outside for some fresh air. Removing yourself from the overwhelming situation gives your body and mind a chance to calm down.



Give Yourself Comforting Input: One common reason our emotions can feel out of control is that we feel unsafe or uncomfortable in some way. To help remind your body that everything is ok, it can help to give yourself some input that you find comforting. This can also help to ground you in your body so that you don't spiral into overthinking and anxious thoughts. This could be wrapping yourself in a soft blanket, listening to calming music, or holding a favorite object. Engaging with something that feels good to you can help soothe your senses and bring you back to a more balanced state. If you're looking for ideas, there are great lists [here](#) and [here](#).



Use a Sensory Tool: If you have a sensory toolkit or bag, now is the time to use it. Pull out something that helps you feel grounded, like a stress ball, a soothing scent, or a fidget toy. These tools are there to help you manage your emotions and bring yourself back to a more regulated state.



Focus on Your Breathing: If you're feeling overwhelmed, taking slow, deep breaths can help calm your nervous system. There are many strategies for breathing, and you can work on finding one that's good for you. You can count to four as you breath in, hold your breath for four, and then exhale. You can try exhaling for one count longer than you inhale. Whatever you do, take the time to notice your breathing.



Try a Body Scan: Another option that is helpful for autistics is to do a body scan. This can help you tune in to where you're holding tension, if you're feeling pain or discomfort, and remind you that you're grounded in your body. For a full description of how to do a body scan, [click here](#).