

Autism Hub

West Cheshire



Week 3

Exploring sensory differences

Sensory differences

- *“Hyper or hypo reactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment.” (DSM-V, 2013)*



- *Senses are intensified (hyper) or reduced (hypo). The senses that can be affected are touch, balance, sight, hearing, smell, taste and awareness of where body parts are and how they are moving, known as proprioception.*

Different perceptions: What do you see?



Don't look at the dress, look at the background,
the contrast is completely different...



Different experiences:



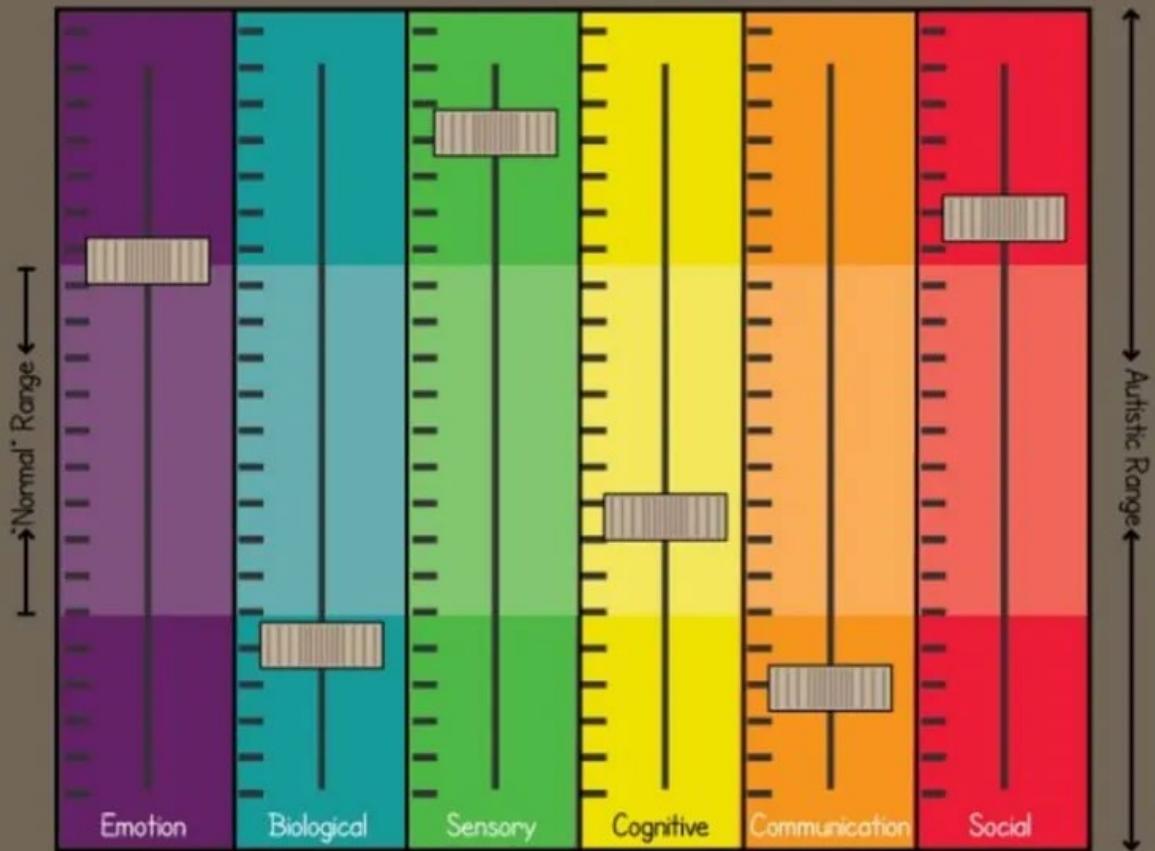
- Autistic individuals are precisely that...individual!
- You will all have different sensory experiences

“One person’s sensory nightmare might be another’s sensory heaven-such is the nature of autism!”

Beardon, 2017, p. 55



The Autism Equaliser



Autism (ASD or Autism Spectrum Disorder) is a condition where a person is disordered in areas of their development. It affects every part of their lives and it is life long. There is no cure for it and you don't grow out of it, but you can learn to manage it.

No two people with autism are the same, nor is any one person with autism the same every day. Think of it like an equaliser; sometimes the "sensory" bar is high, sometimes it is low and, occasionally, it is just right. We have our good days and our bad days, just like everybody, only we often experience it in extremes.

Individuality!

https://www.autism-unlimited.org/my-autistic-self/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw-pyqBhDmARIsAKd9XIOgmPHGa3kjRWSYZQ5ys27QWzLPwU-X6wBEdRyx1LQ4XzLjorBnUAYaAj_xEALw_wcB



Visual

Does you notice patterns and detail and are overwhelmed by certain visual stimuli such as bright or flickering lights, certain patterns? You may be over/hyper-sensitive to visual stimuli. This may fluctuate and sometimes you may be under/hypo sensitive. They may seek certain stimuli.

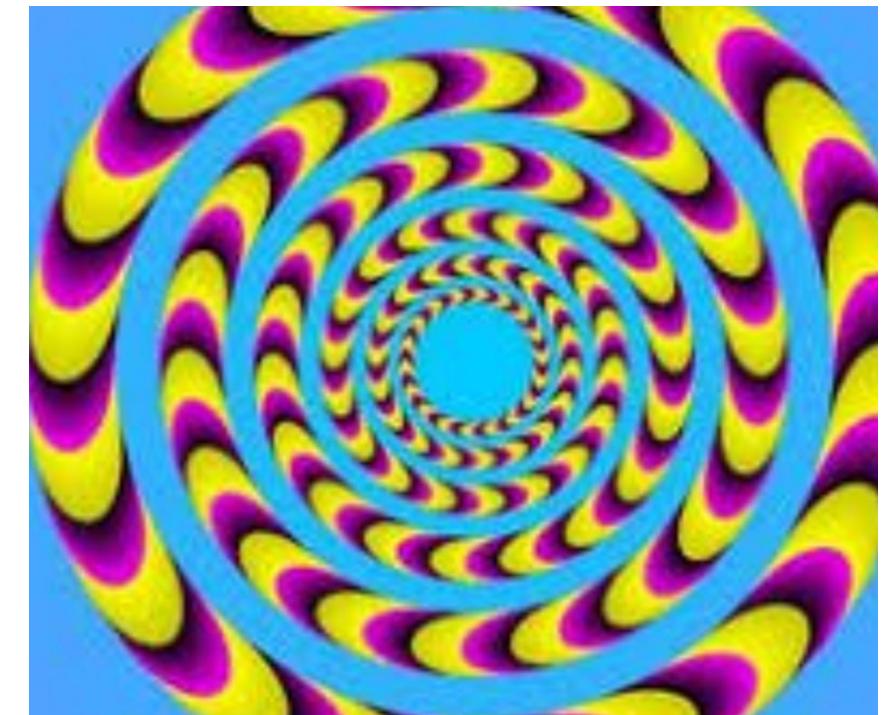
Discuss strategies as a group



Possible trigger on next slide if you are sensitive to visual stimuli.

Sensory stimuli

- What happens when you look at this picture?
- Discuss



Auditory

Do you find certain sounds painful, or have difficulty when two or more people are talking? You may be **over/hyper-sensitive to auditory stimuli** and are unable to screen out irrelevant or background noise. Or do you seek out specific or loud sounds? **You may primarily be under/hypo sensitive.** You may be unable to hear certain sounds.

Discuss strategies as a group.



Different experiences

- Temple Grandin (1996b) highlights how her hearing can be like having an amplifier. Her ears are like microphones detecting and amplifying sounds.
- Anya Ustaszewski (Activist and contemporary musician describes how: *“the volume of noises can be magnified and surrounding sounds distorted and muddled. I have an inability to cut out particular sounds and a lower hearing threshold, which makes me particularly sensitive to auditory stimuli...on the positive side, it means that I notice sounds that others may not hear at all. I hear detail and beauty in sound; I observe qualities that others may completely miss.”*

Olfactory

- Does you find certain smells really offensive and are overwhelmed by them? You may be over/hyper-sensitivity to certain smells which can make some situations intolerable. You may be able to detect smells such as smoke before others which is an advantage! Do you seek out certain smells, craving specific olfactory stimuli suggesting an under or hypo profile?
- Discuss strategies as a group



Tactile

For some who are over/hyper-sensitive to touch, the touch of others, or their clothing, certain textures or substances, can cause extreme distress. Certain types of touch such as light may be more problematic. Being under/hypo sensitive to touch and pain may present as not perceiving and reporting an injury or illness.

Discuss strategies as a group.



Taste

- You might only be able to tolerate the same brand and can pick up the slightest difference in taste.

You might crave really strong or bland food.



The same every time.



Vestibular



You may:

- Not be able to keep balance easily such as on uneven or moving surfaces.
- Crave certain movements. Rocking, twirling, flapping etc. can reduce anxiety or help express happy emotions.

Proprioception

Sensing where our body is in space and knowing where we start and end. Does you miscalculate how much weight is needed, bump into things, feel the need to lean on another person or desk, want to have no shoes and socks on?

Discuss strategies with group





Interoception facts:

“Interoception allows us to feel our internal organs and skin and gives information regarding the internal state or condition of our body”

(Craig, 2002 cited in Mahler, 2017).

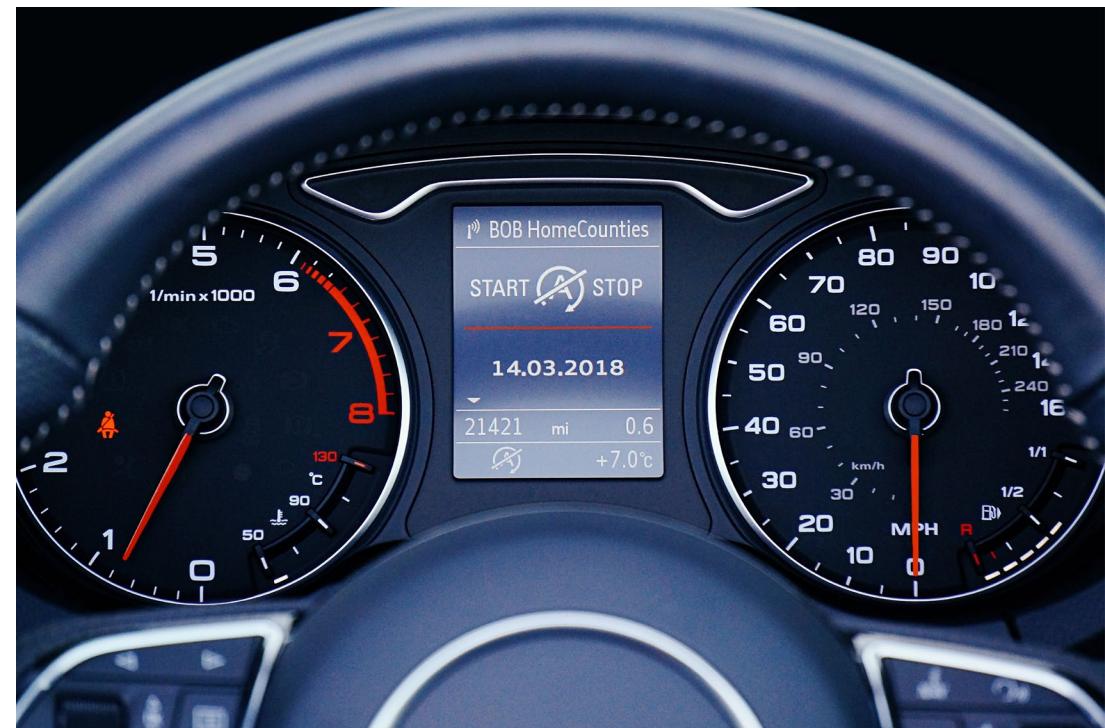
- The control centre for interoception is the insula area in the brain.
- **Do you struggle to recognize the signals from your body?**

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is being able to control and adapt systems such as emotional regulation, executive functioning and sensory integration (Gibbs, 2017).

“Difficulties with interoception impact on this ability as:

The interoceptive system drives our self-regulation behaviours.” (Mahler, 2017, p. 14)



Our body's petrol tank:

Mahler (2017) describes interoception as being like our body's petrol tank.

Signals in our body's petrol tank



Our body reacts in the necessary way.

Compare difficulties with interoception with petrol tank not working in a car?



Interoception

What is INTEROCEPTION?

Interoception is a sense that allows us to notice internal body signals like a growling stomach, racing heart, tense muscles or full bladder. When we notice these body signals our brain uses them as clues to our emotions.

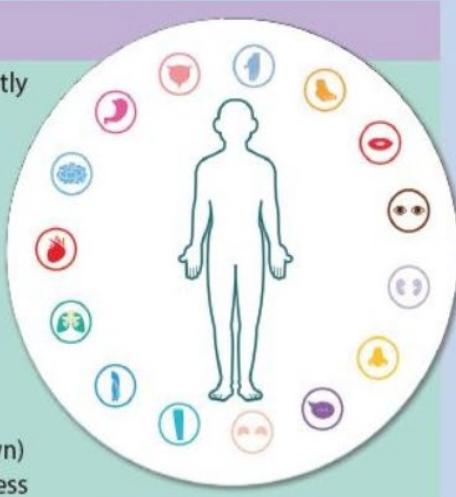
Interoception helps us to feel many important emotions including:

Hunger	Pain	Sleepiness	Anxiety	Calm
Fullness	Illness	Need for Bathroom	Distraction	Boredom
Thirst	Body Temperature	Anger	Focus	Sadness

Differences in Interoception

are very common and can lead to challenges in identifying exactly how one feels. Common signs of interoception differences can include **difficulty** with one or more of the following:

- Recognizing when hungry, full or thirsty
- Toilet training (daytime and/or night time)
- Identifying when sleepy
- Overly sensitive or not sensitive enough to pain
- Pinpointing symptoms of illness
- Identifying emotions in self
- Identifying emotions in others
- Recognizing building signs of distress (before a full meltdown)
- Independently using coping strategies during times of distress



This relates to sensitivity/awareness of our organs inside our body, recognising internal body signals. These signals let you know when you need to eat or drink, go to the toilet, when you are in pain etc.

[Https://kellymahler.com](https://kellymahler.com)

Related difficulties:

- Recognising the signals in your body can help you to know how you are feeling (alexithymia).
- **Do you find it difficult to identify and describe to others how you are feeling to others?**

“Sometimes those emotions are hard to identify because they are muted or jumbled up. Sometimes they’re hard to identify because they’re overwhelmingly intense”.

(Kim 2014, p. 143).

Self-regulation cont.

- Unless we know how we are feeling, we can't possibly begin to regulate ourselves. In this way, difficulties with alexithymia and interoceptive differences can contribute to high levels of anxiety, exhaustion and overwhelm.



Learning by rote:



“If we don’t recognize the signals in our body then we often rely on learning the rules, working everything out instead of using instinct”.
(Craig, 2002 cited in Mahler, 2017).

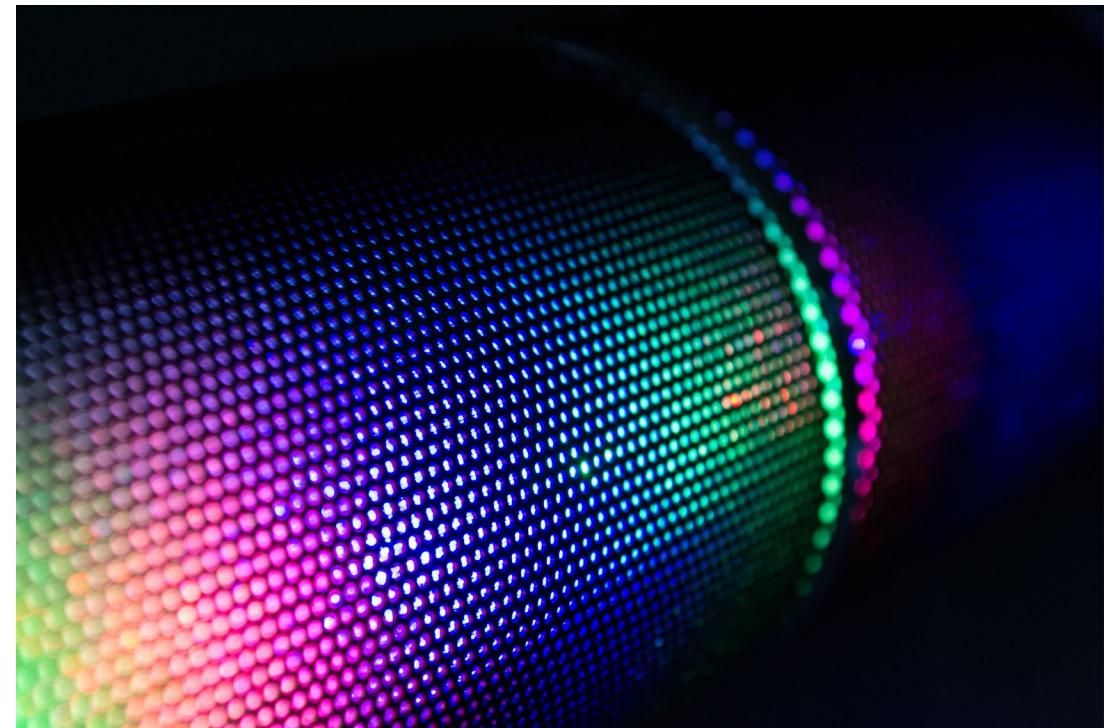


Discuss:



Sensory enjoyment:

- There are aspects of the sensory world which can be enjoyable for many.
- However, for others even the anticipation of certain sensory stimuli can be anxiety inducing.



The autistic voice



“Environments are often nightmares of continual sensory bombardment which interferes with learning and causes constant discomfort or pain.”

Sinclair cited in Sainsbury, 2000, p. 99

Sensory stimuli and anxiety:



Which comes first? (Green and Ben-Sasson, 2010)

Anxiety (hypervigilance and hyperarousal)

or

Sensory sensitivity



increased sensitivity to stimuli



anxiety

Sensory prediction

- Differences in sensory prediction could contribute to developing anxiety in autism.
- Sensory prediction helps us to make sense of the world
- Sensory prediction processes filter incoming stimuli ie, our brain suppresses expected info but reacts anxiously to unexpected events.



What can we do?



“In dealing with sensory issues I have learned to know myself well enough to avoid areas that are difficult. Also to take care of myself if I have been exposed to an environment that has been hostile to my senses.”

Morgan, cited in Attwood (2014).

Acceptance



“Give yourself permission to be who you are, with your sensory issues. This can help you feel a lot better.”

(Maguire, an autistic adult cited in Attwood, 2014).