

Coping with Sensory Overload

FOR MANY ADULTS AND CHILDREN with ADHD, sensory overload can affect relationships.

When we are flooded with sensory information, lights feel brighter, sounds are louder, and crowds seem to close in on us. Sensory bombardment and overwhelm can make situations draining and anxiety-provoking. To reduce the effects of overstimulation, we may try to cope by going quiet or avoiding eye contact.

For many adults and children with ADHD, sensory overload can affect the impression we make, how we are perceived, and our relationships. A quick exit from a party, avoidance of social situations, or the sharp tone we employ in the moment may make some people think we are rude, distant, or upset with them.

First, we must understand how sensory information affects the ADHD brain.

When one or more of the five senses are flooding the brain, a person with ADHD may struggle to process the competing sensory information. The brain, alerted to more stimuli than it can process, sounds an alarm that danger is near. The body instinctually reads this signal as a threat and enters fight, flight, or freeze mode.

When you experience sensory overload, do your friends and family think it is a rejection? Often our loved ones, partners, and friends do not understand why we adults and children with ADHD avoid certain situations, grow quiet, or flee the scene. Their rebuke or confusion adds to the feelings of shame and guilt, their misinterpretations add to the overwhelm. You may even wonder, why not just stay home?

Well, rather than opting out of all connection, you can employ strategies to cope with sensory overload.

Five Strategies: Be Social and Cope with Sensory Overload

1. Share the struggle.

Rather than turning down invitations, ghosting texts, and fleeing parties with no explanation, confide in close family and friends. Your struggle is real. People who do not struggle with sensory bombardment may not understand or cannot parachute into our minds. Have a go-to phrase you can use, such as “I get very bombarded, this is not the best environment for me.” Without your sharing this, others can’t support you.

2. Propose alternatives.

Rather than cocooning away from those to whom you want to connect, propose an alternative. If you know that an environment is difficult to navigate and that it is going to push all your sensory buttons, perhaps it is not the best place to be social. Where else can you go together? Is there another activity that works? Weigh the benefits.

3. Watch for triggers.

If you are aware that sensory overload impacts you or your child, consider when and



where circumstances are particularly triggering. Children with ADHD may not be able to fully identify and express the impact of sensory stimuli on their behavior. Watch for reactions and look for events and settings that precede a meltdown. Ask your child what the place or circumstance felt like to help them better forecast an upcoming trigger.

4. Engage in a pre-game strategy.


Parties, concerts, hallways, or subway stations crushing with people can be full of competing sensory information. Identify calming techniques that help you avoid or lessen a tailspin. Before the event, practice techniques such as mindfulness and self-talk to center, reassure, and calm your limbic system. Self-care such as hydration, sleep, and nourishment can be beneficial, too.

5. Preplan for the event.

If you must go somewhere that is a triggering, have a plan. Perhaps enter with a buddy, arrive later or earlier, or plan to stay only until things are at a tipping point. Bombardment of sensory stimuli and the cascade that leads to fight, flight, or freeze will make it hard to pay attention to social cues and read the room. Take steps to protect yourself like lessening auditory triggers with earphones, choosing seats out of the fray, and going at times with less traffic, noise, and people to prevent overwhelm.

Sensory overload is common for people with ADHD of all ages. Some of the symptoms of ADHD—such as self-regulation and trouble paying attention to what's going on around you—may themselves induce sensory overload. When you're not tuned in, sensory information can sneak up on you.

If you are still affected strongly even after employing these strategies, you may need to seek medical advice. There are treatments for sensory overload, so don't hesitate to bring this challenge up to a medical professional.

Whatever it takes, be sure to stay connected. Life is so much better when it is shared. 



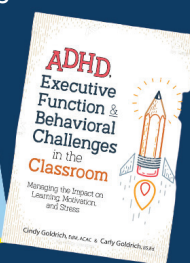
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