### Strategies for Dealing with SensoryOverload

#### What’s good for neurodivergent adults is often good for neurotypical adults, too!

Every day, neurodivergent people face the burden of navigating a world that doesn’t always have their needs in mind. Modern learning and working environments are riddled with sensory stimulation. Looking beyond the stress of deadlines and workloads, neurodivergent folks must also worry about their sensory, social, and other needs. This can quickly become exhausting and overwhelming.

Whether at school or work, it is often the neurodivergent individual’s responsibility to provide their own accommodations. The reality is, self-advocacy and self-care are necessary in a world designed for “the norm”. While every divergent thinker’s needs are different, there are effective strategies to self-regulate and decrease the risk for sensory overload. Some people may struggle with audio input. Others may find themselves struggling with visual or tactile stimuli. Still, others may have to find ways to cope with all the above.

Here are some strategies that may be useful for neurodivergent individuals to mitigate sensory overload. Employers will also benefit when they know what accommodations to suggest for their neurodiverse workforce.

#### Strategies for Dealing with Audio Overload

The feeling of being overwhelmed or irritated by audio input varies from person to person. For some people, loud, sudden noises provoke extreme anxiety or trigger a startle response. Others may feel the same distress with tiny noises , imperceptible to most, but overwhelming to them. For example, some people can hear the buzz of fluorescent lights and find it unbearable.

Noise-canceling headphones may reduce the stress from auditory input by reducing the input. There’s also the option of wearing in-ear earplugs for those who can’t use headphones. These reduce background noise, and in some cases, retain foreground noise and voices so that conversation is not affected.

If someone is comfortable divulging their sensory needs, they can also choose to ask their coworkers, fellow students, teachers, or employers to help reduce the sound triggering the discomfort or stress. This strategy may be especially effective in safe circles, such as with close friends or family, for example.

#### Strategies for Dealing with Visual Overload

Bright, pulsing, or otherwise aggressive lighting can be extremely distressing for neurodivergent people. It can also trigger seizures in people who are epileptic. Despite the potentially life-threatening nature and distress caused by strobe effects, this type of lighting is still common in places where people gather to socialize, dance, and pray.

Flickering light bulbs create flashing patterns that can cause sensory overload and distraction, both in schools and in the workplace. The first step to safety is to fix the issue. Call the maintenance department and ask for it to be repaired as soon as possible. Other options are to put blue lighting covers over the fluorescent bulbs or choose lightbulbs that imitate natural light. [You might find this researched-based article on the topic of lighting in the classroom informative.](https://susanfitzell.com/improve-learning-with-research-based-classroom-lighting-strategies/)

Once broken lights or appliances have been attended to, some may still find the environment too bright for comfort. Although wearing sunglasses indoors may feel silly, it’s an option. Also, glasses with colored lenses such as blue or pink lenses can alleviate discomfort. If it’s an accommodation that helps someone reduce visual stimuli, it should be considered a viable option for reducing sensory distress.

Another potential path could be dimming the lights in the office or study rooms or reducing the brightness of screens. Taking visual breaks, such as looking away from screens or bright lights and towards a comforting sight at set intervals, may also prove to be helpful. According to a study titled [*Computer Terminal Work and the Benefit of Microbreaks*](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0003687000000715), taking visual breaks at 20-minute intervals helped alleviate worker discomfort.

**Strategies for Dealing with Tactile Sensitivity**

Another potential source of sensory distress is tactile input. For certain neurodivergent folks, it may be triggering or uncomfortable to touch or come in physical contact with certain textures.

Individuals with tactile sensitivity can wear comfortable clothing, cut the tags off clothes, or even select touch-friendly office supplies. The challenge will be greater for employees that must wear an assigned uniform. Sometimes the material that uniforms are made with can be quite itchy, scratchy, or just uncomfortable to wear.

One accommodation is to allow employees to wear layers under their uniforms that retain the same external look, feel, and cost, but allow employees with tactile sensitivity to maintain a barrier between them and the uniforms.

Another would be to offer alternate uniforms, but that becomes tricky. Supplies of alternate uniforms using different materials can be limited, more expensive, harder to maintain or clean, or even have a different “look” which singles out employees for potential discrimination or persecution by other employees, customers, or even by the employees themselves for feeling “out of place”

This issue came up for an employee at a Florida state college. The administration selected shirts for janitorial staff and one employee noted her discomfort with the material. She was allowed to go to the uniform shop, select different material that was more comfortable for her. Her uniform was created from that material. This is an outstanding example of providing an accommodation that honors an employee’s sensory needs.

From time to time, however, contact with a certain textures may be unavoidable. It may be helpful to carry an object with a pleasant texture that can be handled afterward to help offset any tactile discomfort.

Deep pressure is also helpful in regulating touch sensitivity. While it may not be easy to get a calming massage or firm hug at work or school, it’s still something that can be incorporated into the daily routine to help increase stress tolerance. Weighted lap pads are easy to use at work. Weighted objects, such as stuffed animals, may be carried around. After researching weighted lap blankets, I found a source that I loved in New Hampshire. It’s a small business with outstanding customer service and a personal touch: [Hug Patrol.](https://hugpatrol.net/) Alternatively, the use of compression clothing might provide relief for some.

#### Other Strategies for Sensory Overload

Despite using available strategies to mitigate sensory overload, neurodivergent individuals may still find themselves overwhelmed. If this happens, here are a couple of other tips to make the experience more tolerable and potentially shorter.

● Give employees, or yourself, permission to remove themselves from an overwhelming situation.

● Self-regulating behaviors such as pacing, rocking, vocalizing, or other “stims” should be permitted. This may require some awareness training for coworkers.

#### Sensory Overload Happens

One issue that’s extremely important to address is the guilt and/or shame felt after a sensory overload-induced meltdown.

For divergent thinkers, it may help to work with a specialist, do self-directed therapy, or unlearn ableist ideals. For those who work with neurodivergent individuals, it may help to lessen their sense of guilt and embarrassment if they are allowed the time and space needed to process in a non-judgmental manner.

You wouldn’t get mad at a fish for not being able to walk, so why get mad at a neurodivergent brain for not being able to function in neurotypical ways?

When considering workplace challenges faced by employees in the neurodiverse workplace, we must provide room for neurotypicals to learn, accept, and grow in understanding. We also need to show them how to nurture a safe place for neurodivergents to be their best selves. However, it’s not a one-sided proposition. Neurodivergent individuals have an opportunity to grow and learn, also.

The goal is for all employees to bring out their best selves. The beauty of a workplace culture that fosters acceptance, support, and understanding is that both neurotypical and neurodivergent team members can thrive. It’s a two-way street. I’ve spent my entire career showing educators how what is good for neurodivergent students is good for ALL students. The same goes for our teammates. We are all unique in our own way. We all have quirks, sensitivities, obsessions, special interests. We all have differently wired brains. If you consider a continuum and pretend that the middle of the line is the norm, we have people spread across the continuum to both ends of the line. If we can open our minds to accept that people who are different than us have value and their value combined with others’ value creates immense value, we all excel together.

And for the focus presented here, it’s important to understand that sensory overload happens, even for those who are considered neurotypical. Understanding some basic strategies for dealing with it is beneficial for everyone — whether it be at work, at school, or in the home.

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Improve Learning with Research-Based Classroom Lighting Strategies<https://susanfitzell.com/improve-learning-with-research-based-classroom-lighting-strategies/>

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Susan Fitzell, M. Ed, CSP, is a nationally recognized presenter, author of nine books for teachers, trainers, and parents, an educational consultant, and CEO of Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. As an independent consultant and coach, Susan offers the personalization, continuity, and consistency necessary for true change in any organization. She works side by side with teachers, school administrators, and business leaders as a coach and trainer, employing Brain Power strategies that take learning to the next level.

For more information, visit Susan's website at [www.susanfitzell.com](http://www.susanfitzell.com/).

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PO Box 6182  
Manchester, NH 03108

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