

Workplace Sensory Overload

WHEN LIGHTING, NOISE, SMELLS, INTERRUPTIONS, TEMPERATURE AND BUSY ENVIRONMENTS BECOME TOO MUCH

When the workplace itself becomes part of the workload

A workplace is not only made up of tasks, deadlines and conversations. It is also made up of sound, light, movement, smells, temperature, textures, people passing, phones ringing, keyboards tapping, doors opening and conversations happening nearby. For some people these things sit quietly in the background. For others, the brain continues to register them all.

Sensory overload happens when the amount or intensity of incoming information becomes more than a person can comfortably process. It can affect autistic and ADHD people particularly strongly, but sensory sensitivity is not limited to neurodivergence. Stress, migraine, fatigue, anxiety, illness and other individual factors can also change how tolerable an environment feels.

The person may still be doing their job while using a significant amount of energy simply to remain in the environment. That hidden effort matters.

If somebody is using half of their available capacity to tolerate the environment, they do not have the same capacity left for the work.

Noise is not just volume

A loud machine may be difficult, but so can unpredictable or competing sounds: two conversations at once, a phone ringing, music, footsteps, a colleague clicking a pen or the constant arrival of notifications. Some people cannot easily filter background sound. Their brain keeps bringing it forward, making concentration increasingly difficult.

Lighting and visual load

Fluorescent lighting, glare, flicker, bright screens, reflections and visually busy spaces can create discomfort or fatigue. An open-plan office also brings constant movement into peripheral vision. Someone may appear distracted when their attention is repeatedly being pulled towards information they did not choose to process.

Smell, temperature and physical comfort

Perfume, aftershave, cleaning products, food smells or air fresheners can be overwhelming for some people. Temperature can be equally important: being too hot or cold can make regulation and concentration harder. Clothing requirements, chair textures and crowded spaces can add further sensory demand.

None of these experiences need to look dramatic from the outside to have a substantial cumulative effect.

What Sensory Overload Can Look Like at Work

Overload does not always look like someone covering their ears. A person may become unusually quiet, irritable or tearful. They may lose words, make more mistakes, struggle to follow conversation, need to leave the room, feel physically unwell or find that a simple question suddenly feels impossible to answer.

Some people describe reaching a point where every additional sound or interruption feels physically intrusive. Others experience headache, nausea, tension, dizziness, agitation or overwhelming tiredness. After work they may need hours of silence or darkness to recover.

The accumulation matters

One phone call may be manageable. One bright light may be manageable. One interruption may be manageable. But combine fluorescent lighting, chatter, perfume, screen glare, a warm room, six interruptions and a meeting in a busy space, and the total sensory load can become very different.

This is why somebody may seem fine in the morning and struggle later in the day. Capacity is being used continuously.

Interruptions are sensory and cognitive

An interruption does not only add sound. It requires the brain to disengage from one task, process the new information, respond and then reconstruct where it was before. For someone with ADHD, autism or concentration difficulties, that reconstruction may take significant energy. Frequent interruptions can therefore create both sensory overload and executive-function fatigue.

Practical changes do not have to be complicated

Helpful changes might include access to a quieter workspace, noise-reducing headphones where safe and appropriate, moving away from high-traffic areas, adjusting lighting, reducing unnecessary notifications, allowing focused work periods, providing a lower-stimulation space for breaks or offering some flexibility around where particular tasks are completed.

Where smells are a significant issue, teams may be able to reduce strongly scented products or consider where food and cleaning products are used. Temperature concerns may sometimes be addressed through seating location, clothing flexibility or local environmental changes.

The best adjustment is not necessarily the one somebody else found helpful. Ask the person what they notice and what actually reduces the load.

Creating a Workplace That Does Not Demand Constant Tolerance

Sensory inclusion is not about making every workplace silent, dim and scent-free. Different employees have different needs, and some people concentrate better with movement or background stimulation. The aim is flexibility: creating enough choice that one standard environment is not treated as the only acceptable way to work.

Managers: believe the experience before trying to measure it

A common difficulty is that sensory needs can sound minor to someone who does not share them. 'The light isn't that bright.' 'Nobody else minds the music.' 'It's only perfume.' But sensory experience is individual. The fact that one person can filter a stimulus does not mean another nervous system can do the same.

Rather than debating whether something should be uncomfortable, ask what effect it is having and what realistic change might help.

For the employee: map the pattern

Notice when overload is strongest. Is there a particular room, time of day or combination of triggers? What happens in your body first? Do you become irritable, lose concentration, go quiet or need to escape? What helps you recover? A simple sensory map can make a vague feeling of 'I can't cope in this office' much easier to communicate.

If sensory needs are substantially affecting work, a discussion with a manager, occupational health or another appropriate workplace support route may help identify practical adjustments. Individual health advice may also be useful where symptoms are new, severe or unexplained.

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

One of the hardest parts of sensory overload is being told that the thing hurting you is 'nothing.' The sound is ordinary. The light looks normal. The office temperature seems fine to everyone else. Yet your nervous system is still working incredibly hard to process it.

I would encourage workplaces to move away from asking, 'Why can't this person tolerate what everybody else tolerates?' and towards asking, 'What would help this person use more of their energy for their actual job?'

Small environmental changes can release an enormous amount of capacity. A quieter desk, fewer interruptions, softer lighting or permission to regulate before reaching overload may look insignificant on a policy document. To the person who has spent every working day enduring the environment, it can change everything.

A sensory check-in: What sounds, lighting, smells, temperatures, textures, movement or interruptions use the most energy for me? When does my tolerance drop? What helps me recover? What one environmental change could make the biggest difference to my working day?

Important: This resource provides general wellbeing information and does not replace individual medical, psychological, occupational-health, safety or employment advice.