WORKPLACE SENSORY OVERLOAD

A practical, accessible guide to recognising sensory strain and improving everyday working conditions.

A workplace can feel manageable to one person and overwhelming to another. Sensory overload may occur when sound, lighting, smells, temperature, movement, touch and interruptions combine beyond what someone can comfortably process. The effect may build gradually, even when each individual stimulus seems minor.

Six common sources of sensory strain

1. Noise and competing sound. Open-plan conversations, telephones, printers, alarms, machinery and music can make it hard to filter relevant information. Sudden noise can interrupt a complex task and make returning to it difficult.

2. Lighting and visual activity. Flicker, harsh overhead lights, screen glare, bright sunlight, clutter and movement in peripheral vision can contribute to headaches, eye strain or difficulty focusing.

3. Smells and air quality. Perfume, food, cleaning products and poorly ventilated spaces may cause discomfort, nausea or distraction for some people. Sensitivities vary widely.

4. Temperature and physical contact. Heat, cold, draughts, crowded rooms, uncomfortable seating, clothing textures and uniforms may add to the overall load.

5. Interruptions and unpredictable demands. Repeated questions, sudden meetings, shifting priorities and being approached while concentrating add cognitive demands alongside environmental ones.

6. Crowding and social intensity. Busy reception areas, commuting, hot-desking, overlapping conversations and back-to-back meetings may leave little opportunity to recover.

What signs might someone notice?

Early signs can include increased effort to concentrate, irritability, tiredness, tension, headaches, difficulty following speech, restlessness or a need for quiet. Later signs may include withdrawal, tearfulness, feeling overwhelmed, reduced processing speed or needing to leave the environment. These signs can have other causes: ask the person what they are experiencing rather than making assumptions.

How the load can accumulate

Imagine arriving after a noisy commute, attending a brightly lit meeting, answering constant questions and then working beside a printer. Each demand may be tolerable alone; together they may leave little capacity for the next task. Someone may look outwardly composed while masking discomfort, only to feel exhausted once home.

A useful first step

For one week, note when discomfort rises, what is happening in the environment, what helps and whether the difficulty changes through the day. Record observations rather than diagnoses. Look for patterns across tasks, locations, times and recovery opportunities.

PRACTICAL ADJUSTMENTS & SUPPORT

The aim is not to make an employee tolerate an unsuitable environment. It is to identify avoidable barriers and trial practical changes that support both wellbeing and work.

Adjust the environment

Sound. Consider a quieter desk, noise-dampening measures, designated focus periods, quieter meeting rooms or noise-reducing headphones where compatible with safety and communication needs.

Light and visual comfort. Explore blinds, reducing screen glare, alternative desk positions, adjustable task lighting, screen settings and alternatives to flickering or harsh lights.

Smell, temperature and comfort. Review ventilation, cleaning schedules, fragrance-aware arrangements, seating, uniform requirements and access to water. Avoid blanket assumptions about what will help.

Predictability. Use advance agendas, written instructions, scheduled check-ins, clear task priorities and agreed channels for genuinely urgent requests.

Recovery. Where feasible, provide access to a quieter space, manageable breaks and opportunities to move away from high-stimulation areas after demanding activities.

Two realistic workplace examples

Busy office: A colleague is repeatedly interrupted at a desk near a shared printer. A trial moves their workstation, groups non-urgent questions into two check-ins and provides written priorities. After two weeks, they report fewer headaches and more consistent concentration.

Customer-facing role: An employee finds the combination of music, strong cleaning smells and crowded shift changes difficult. The manager explores cleaning times, ventilation, predictable shift handovers and access to a lower-stimulation break area while preserving essential safety and customer duties.

Starting a constructive conversation

Employee: “By the afternoon, the overlapping conversations and bright lights make it difficult to concentrate. Could we trial a quieter desk and different lighting for two weeks, then review the effect?”

Manager: “Thank you for explaining. Which parts of the environment have the greatest impact? Let us identify what we can change, agree a trial and check what works.”

Disability, neurodivergence and legal considerations

Sensory differences may affect autistic and ADHD employees, and people with migraines, hearing differences, chronic health conditions or other disabilities. Needs differ between individuals; a diagnosis should not be presumed. Under the Equality Act 2010, employers in Great Britain may need to make reasonable adjustments for disabled employees where the legal conditions apply. Occupational health can help identify options. Access to Work may provide support but does not replace an employer’s legal duties.

A practical two-week trial

Identify: one or two barriers. **Agree:** changes, responsibilities and any safety requirements. **Trial:** for a realistic period. **Review:** comfort, concentration, work outcomes and unintended effects. **Adapt:** keep what helps and revise what does not.

MY SENSORY SUPPORT WORKBOOK

Use this page privately or as preparation for a conversation. You can share the practical adjustments you need without disclosing more personal information than necessary.

Notice your patterns

1. Which sounds, lights, smells, temperatures, spaces or interruptions affect me most?

2. What early signs tell me I am becoming overloaded?

3. Which tasks, locations or times of day feel easier — and why?

Choose practical support

4. Which two environmental or communication changes could I trial first?

5. Who could I speak to, and what wording would help me explain the impact?

6. What would tell me the adjustment is helping? When should we review it?

Mini workplace observation tracker

When / where	What I noticed	Effect on work	What helped

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Needing softer lighting, quieter surroundings, clearer communication or recovery time does not mean someone is less capable or committed. A supportive workplace makes room for different sensory needs and tests practical changes together.

UK guidance: ACAS (acas.org.uk); Health and Safety Executive (hse.gov.uk); Equality and Human Rights Commission (equalityhumanrights.com); Access to Work (gov.uk/access-to-work). Educational information only; not individual medical, occupational-health or legal advice.