Understanding sensory overload at work

Recognising how sensory environments can affect comfort, participation and wellbeing.

Sensory needs are individual

Sounds, lighting, smells, touch, movement and temperature can feel supportive, neutral or difficult. A workplace may contain several demands at once, and capacity can change across the day.

Common workplace sensory demands

Sound	Conversations, phones, machinery, alarms
Light	Glare, flicker, bright lights and screens
Temperature	Heating, air flow and changes in temperature
Smell	Fragrances, food and cleaning products
Touch and movement	Seating, clothing, crowds and busy walkways

A useful principle

The aim is not to tolerate an unsuitable environment. Identifying barriers can help you consider adjustments, access support and make working conditions more accessible.

One sensory feature that helps me feel comfortable at work

My workplace sensory environment

Notice which aspects of your environment are comfortable, difficult or variable.

Tick or mark what fits: Comfortable (C) | Sometimes difficult (S) | Often difficult (O) | Unsure (?)

Sound

Voices, calls, machinery, background noise

C S O ?

Lighting

Overhead lights, glare, screens

C S O ?

Temperature

Heat, cold, ventilation

C S O ?

Smells

Food, fragrances, cleaning products

C S O ?

Touch

Seating, uniform, textures

C S O ?

Movement

Busy spaces, passing people

C S O ?

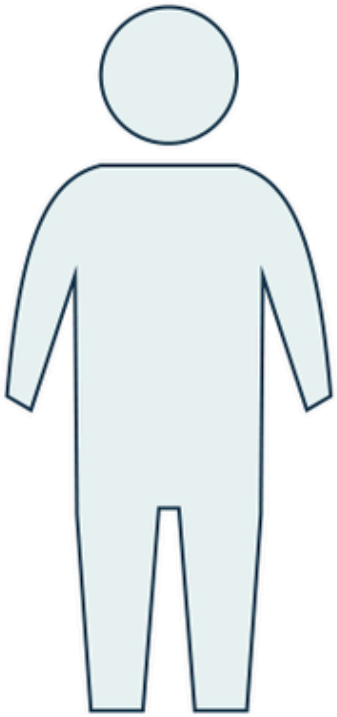
Which sensory experiences support me?

Which situations would I like to change?

Recognising my sensory responses

Connect particular sensory demands with how you experience them and what might help.

You can mark the outline, add notes or use the reflection spaces. Not everyone notices physical warning signs.



Sensory experience or situation

What I notice in my body or thoughts

What might make this easier

Examples, not a checklist

Some people notice tension, fatigue, headache, reduced concentration or a need to leave. Others notice little until demands have already become too much.

Other patterns or changes I have noticed

Identifying helpful sensory adjustments

Consider changes to the environment or working arrangements that could reduce barriers.

Possible adjustments to discuss

Sound	Quieter work areas; alternative meeting spaces; safe use of noise reduction.
Lighting	Adjustable lighting; glare reduction; screen settings; different seating.
Comfort	Suitable seating; ventilation; flexibility around clothing where possible.
Work patterns	Flexible breaks; predictable transitions; quieter times or locations.
Communication	Written instructions; advance notice of changes; meeting alternatives.

My adjustment ideas

Sensory barrier	Adjustment I could try or request	How it could help

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Creating a sensory-friendly working routine

Map demands across the day and identify opportunities for adjustments and recovery.

My working day sensory map

Before work — Travel, preparation and transitions

What I notice:

What may help:

Starting work — Settling in, lighting and sound

What I notice:

What may help:

During work — Tasks, meetings and busy periods

What I notice:

What may help:

Breaks — Rest, reduced stimulation and choice

What I notice:

What may help:

Finishing work — Transitions, travel and recovery

What I notice:

What may help:

Plan for flexibility

Sensory needs may shift during the day. Adjusting routines, taking breaks and reducing demands are valid supports, not signs of failure.

My workplace sensory support plan

Bring your reflections together into a practical, personalised reference.

My main sensory needs or environmental barriers

Signs that demands are becoming difficult for me

Adjustments or equipment that may help

People, resources or communication approaches that support me

One next step I would like to take

A possible way to begin a conversation

“I find [specific situation] difficult because [practical impact]. Could we discuss [adjustment] to make this more manageable?” You can share functional needs without using this worksheet to disclose medical details.