

Coping with Sensory Overload

Objective

To reduce sensory overload and the associated anxiety when faced with common triggers.

What to Know

You might be sensitive to bright lights, loud noises, or unfamiliar surroundings and situations. You might worry about situations for which you are unprepared, or fearful about unexpected things happening. All of this can create stress—or *sensory overload*—if you have sensory processing issues.

Sensory overload, and the often-associated fear and anxiety, occurs when you have trouble organizing and processing the information you receive from your five senses. You might be overly sensitive to sounds, sights, textures, flavors, smells, or other sensory input. Conversely, you might be under-sensitive to things like temperature or noise. Sometimes you might experience a mix of both.

Sensory overload can make even the most basic activities feel intolerable, so you may dread everyday situations that are stressful for you, like a trip to the grocery store. You might worry that you will find yourself in a situation that you are unable to escape.

Check off any of the following statements that apply to you.

I have difficulty focusing when there is competing sensory input (for example, multiple conversations going on in a room).

I become extremely irritable when my senses are overwhelmed.

I am restless and uncomfortable, and feel like I want to “escape” from certain situations.

I frequently have the urge to cover my ears or shield my eyes.

I often feel overly excited or “wound up.”

I experience stress, fear, or anxiety about my surroundings.

I have a higher-than-usual sensitivity to textures, fabrics, clothing tags, or other things that may rub against my skin.

Sensory overload is overwhelming, but identifying coping mechanisms that work for you will put you back in control. Here are some things you can do.

1. Identify common triggers. You can more easily cope if you understand your triggers. If you are sensitive to crowds and noise, plan to go places (like the mall, for example) when there will not be many people there. Or, leave an event early if it simply becomes too much for you.

2. Take time to prepare. Identify what you can expect before attending an event or going somewhere you have not been before. Build in time for a quick walk or toe touches to help you

regulate your sensory system. Choose comfortable clothing beforehand so you do not have to worry about what to wear. Identify a “safe place” where you can escape to regroup if needed.

3. Brainstorm strategies. Find time when you are calm and well-regulated to write about sensory-related situations that worry you. Identify things you can do to make them less stressful.

4. If you find yourself in a triggering situation, think creatively about how to reduce sensory input. For example, take a list to the store and only focus on the task at hand—which can help prevent overwhelm from the options, scents, and sounds. Or, hold conversations in the corner of a room or in a separate room when you are attending a large gathering.

What to Do

First, identify what causes you to feel anxious or fearful when your senses are overloaded. What are your triggers?

Is there anything you can do to prepare for situations that tend to cause sensory overload? Be specific.

Next, write about sensory-related situations that worry you. Describe some things you can do to make them less stressful.

If you are in a triggering situation, what are some things you can do to reduce sensory input?

For the next two weeks use the chart on the next page to track situations that cause you to feel anxious or stressed due to sensory overload. Note the date and describe the situation. Write down the symptoms or sensations you experience, and rate your discomfort from 1 – 10, where 1 = little discomfort, to 10 = intolerable; the worst discomfort you have ever experienced. Describe what you did to cope, and what you could have done differently.

Over the past two weeks, how often were you triggered? _____

What was your most common trigger? _____

What worked best for you to reduce stress and anxiety when coping with sensory overload?

What else can you do to cope with sensory overload?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
