

## Autism Overstimulation And Sensory Overload

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Sensory overload and overstimulation are common signs associated with autistic individuals. They are terms used to describe what happens when an individual receives more sensory input than they can comfortably process.

This experience is often discussed within the context of autism, as autistic people may experience sensory input differently. Sensory overload can happen in anyone but is more likely to occur in autistic individuals.



The signs that an autistic person may be experiencing overstimulation are different depending on the person and the cause of this overwhelm, but these are some common signs.

The experience of sensory overload is often described as an inability to categorize the influx of sensory stimuli in the way that neurotypical people can. In other words, the brain struggles to make sense of and organize the incoming sensory information, leading to feelings of overwhelm.

## Signs of overstimulation in autism

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“I tend to withdraw when overwhelmed. Not physically, I just stop interacting. I can still see/hear everything going on around me, but none of it sticks. The world looks and feels like somebody just sliced a bunch of different recordings and then spliced the segments together at random.”

*‘Max’*

Signs of overstimulation in autism can vary from person to person, but some common indicators include:

- Increased irritability or agitation
- Increased sensory sensitivity, e.g., lights feel brighter, noises feel louder
- Physical symptoms such as heart racing, jaw clenched, or headaches
- Difficulty focusing on what is going on
- Difficulty with processing information
- Feeling the need to escape or be alone
- Changes in speech, such as becoming monotone or repetitive vocalizations
- Being unable to speak at all
- Increased self-stimulatory behaviors (stimming)
- Feeling hot or uncomfortable
- Needing to cover eyes or ears to limit sensory input
- Emotional outbursts or reaching a meltdown point

Autistic people often describe overstimulation as experiencing too much input. My most common indicator that I am feeling overstimulated is that my head feels all “fuzzy,” like there is too much swirling around in my brain.

Ella ([from the YouTube channel Purple Ella](#)), an autistic woman, explains that when input is coming in, it is manageable at first, but then it becomes too much.

She compares the feeling to being at a supermarket checkout, where the cashier is scanning items too quickly. You try to keep up with packing your items, but then it all begins to pile up, and there is pressure to keep going, but it all feels like too much at once.

“If I am upset/emotional about something, I can go completely mute. It almost feels like my jaw is locked or my throat closes off, like I am physically incapable of talking in that moment. It has resulted in some misunderstandings due to me not being able to defend myself or disagree with someone.”

*‘Bryan’*

## What triggers overstimulation?

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There are many ways in which an autistic person may become overstimulated. Primarily, these triggers can be related to the senses but can also come from unexpected events or social situations:

- **Noise:** Loud noises, such as the sound of a fork scraping against a plate or crowds, can be particularly overwhelming. Background noises such as televisions, alarms, telephones, and ticking clocks may also contribute to overstimulation. A high pace of communication can also contribute to feelings of stress.
- **Bright Lights:** Bright lights, especially fluorescent lights, can be irritating and overwhelming for autistic individuals. Some may compare the experience of bright lights to a “buzzing noise.” This sensitivity extends to flickering lights, such as fluorescent lamps and Christmas lights.
- **Textures:** Some individuals may find certain textures or types of touch uncomfortable or even painful. Examples can include itchy clothing, labels on clothes, and certain food textures.
- **Smells:** Strong smells, such as perfumes, certain foods, or cleaning products, can be experienced more intensely for some autistic people and be very overwhelming, especially if there are multiple smells at once.
- **Social Demands:** Social situations, such as attending a wedding or interacting with others, can be challenging and lead to feelings of overwhelm for autistic individuals due to factors such as the volume of talking and the amount of sensory and social input. Social interactions that require masking or suppressing autistic traits can also contribute to this.

- **Visual Clutter:** A visually cluttered environment with too many objects or patterns can be distracting and difficult to process. Visual clutter can negatively impact an individual's social and cognitive abilities, as irrelevant stimuli can draw attention away from conversations and make communication difficult.
- **Crowds:** The presence of many people, particularly in confined or enclosed spaces, can also trigger sensory overload. The senses may be overloaded with many people being too close, feeling enclosed and unable to escape, and the noise may feel like too much.
- **Unpredictability:** Unpredictable environments or situations, especially those involving human interaction or sensory input, can cause a sense of stress and contribute to feeling overwhelmed. Having to quickly make a decision between several choices can also lead to difficulty for some individuals.

## What can trigger shutdowns or meltdowns?

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Oftentimes, there can be multiple triggers for overstimulation, which can result in autistic people experiencing **shutdowns** or **meltdowns**. A shutdown involves withdrawing and becoming non-responsive, while a meltdown is an outward expression of overwhelming emotions.

I will use an example of a time when I experienced an intense feeling of overstimulation to describe this:

I was at a gig with my husband, and we were standing pretty close to the stage before the show started. When the band came onstage, many people around us started closing in and jumping around, bouncing off me.

I felt like I had no control over my movements and was stuck. My face kept landing into the hair of the girl in front of me, and other people's drinks spilled down my back. I was also more aware of how loud the music was.

I felt really unsafe and became so overwhelmed that I broke down in tears. I turned to my husband and couldn't communicate with him aside from just showing him my crying face and shaking my head.

He then pulled me out of the crowd to a quieter spot to recover. For about 20-30 minutes after this, I still could not speak and kept crying so it took me a while to calm down.

In this instance, I became overstimulated by a combination of being in a crowded space and having different negative sensory experiences that heightened my sensitivity, resulting in an intense emotional response.

If this was a situation in which only one negative sensory thing happened (e.g., if someone bumped into me), I might have felt somewhat irritable but could have easily recovered. But, combined with everything else going on, it resulted in a more intense response and longer recovery time.

Other ways autistic people may reach a shutdown or meltdown include:

1. Prolonged exposure to challenging environments (e.g., noisy offices, busy shopping centers)
2. Unexpected changes in routine or plans
3. Social interactions that are too intense or prolonged
4. Accumulation of minor stressors throughout the day
5. Sensory overload from lights, sounds, smells, or textures
6. Difficulty communicating needs or feelings
7. Fatigue or lack of sleep affecting coping abilities
8. Hunger or thirst impacting sensory processing
9. Emotional stress from conflicts or misunderstandings

## 10. Processing complex information or instructions

It's important to note that triggers can be cumulative. What seems like a small issue might be the final straw after a day of managing various stressors. Additionally, an autistic person's threshold for overstimulation can vary depending on their overall well-being and energy levels.

## How to prevent and recover from overstimulation

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Below are 7 ways in which you can use to prevent or recover from autistic overstimulation. Some of these may not work for you specifically, but others might be useful. Try some of them out that appeal to you:

### 1. Identify your triggers

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Take time to reflect on situations, environments, and sensory experiences that overwhelm your nervous system or cause you to feel overstimulated, anxious, or distressed. This self-awareness is crucial for managing autistic overstimulation effectively.

Create a list of specific triggers that lead to sensory overload or emotional overwhelm in a journal. You could group these triggers into categories based on type:

- Sensory Triggers (e.g., visual and auditory)
- Environmental Triggers (e.g., crowded spaces, disorganized environments)
- Social Triggers (e.g., extended social interactions, misunderstandings in communication)
- Cognitive Triggers (e.g., information overload, complex instructions or tasks)

By identifying and categorizing your specific overstimulation triggers, you can develop more targeted strategies to manage or avoid these situations, reducing the likelihood of reaching sensory overload or meltdown.

### 2. Adjust the environment

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If you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed, try to adjust your environment as much as you can to limit sensory input. Obviously, this all depends on the situation you are in and what is causing you to feel overstimulated.

For example:

- Dim the lights or turn them off completely
- Reduce background noises, such as turning off TVs, music, and closing windows to avoid the noise of outside traffic and chatter
- Switch to comfortable clothing
- Add a weighted blanket
- Step outside if the indoor space is causing the stimulation
- Declutter the room

Something that often works for me is I will put headphones on and play some calming sounds, either some chilled lo-fi, classical music, white noise, or the sound of a fireplace or rain. I make sure to keep the volume low so as to not make this itself overwhelming.

## Managing Overstimulation In Autism

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**Identify your triggers**



Create a list of specific triggers that lead to sensory overload or emotional overwhelm in a journal

**Reduce sensory input**



Dim the lights, reduce background noise, change into comfortable clothes, use headphones

**Create a sensory-friendly space**



Use lamps and mood lights, designated quiet areas, minimal decor, fidget toys

**Communicate your needs**



Tell close people what stresses you, be assertive when you need a break, use gestures if you can't speak

**Make the most of your downtime**



Take walks in nature, engage in hobbies, lots of rest, self-care, and relaxing exercises

**Plan ahead**



Think through potential triggers and have strategies ready so you can be better equipped to navigate overwhelming experiences

**Utilize personal strategies**



Try mindfulness, sensory breaks, sensory tools, and frequent check ins during overstimulating times

### 3. Create a sensory-friendly environment

Creating a sensory-friendly environment at home in a way that suits your particular needs can make all the difference in preventing overstimulation.

For example:

- Having a designated quiet space for low-intensity activities at home
- Well-ventilated spaces to allow cool air in and let out unwanted odors
- Designated storage boxes to put clutter out of sight

- Painting the walls a dark or muted color
- Use modular furniture that can be easily rearranged for different needs
- Analog clocks and physical calendars to reduce digital overstimulation

Because I know that bright overhead lights make me feel overstimulated, I make sure I have plenty of lamps or other light fixtures in each room of my home.

For example, strip lights and projector lights that can change color and intensity are both calming to look at and less intense than overhead lighting.

#### **4. Communicate needs**

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Ideally, communicating with people you live with, friends, and family is helpful for them to understand what your triggers are and how they can help you.

Below are some ways in which you can communicate your needs:

- Agree on specific non-verbal gestures with close friends and family as an indicator of when you need a break.
- Practice assertive phrases to express your needs, e.g., “I need a quiet space for 10 minutes.”
- Use smartphone apps to type out your needs when speaking is difficult.
- Use colored badges or wristbands to indicate current tolerance level, e.g., green for “I’m okay,” yellow for “I’m getting overwhelmed,” and red for “I need immediate help.”

It’s important not to rely on another person to help you entirely as you still need to put in the work yourself, but there may be things that they can feasibly do to help.

You may also need to compromise if your sensory needs clash with theirs. In this case, try to find some middle ground or a way in which you can reduce sensory input for yourself while not impacting others.

#### **5. Make the most of your downtime**

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When you have free time, use this as an opportunity to recalibrate your sensory system and prevent overstimulation. This can be particularly useful if your everyday life (e.g., work or school) is a prolonged stressor for you.



Remember that you will need to return to potentially stimulating environments afterward, so use this time effectively to prepare yourself.

Below are some ideas for sensory-friendly activities during your reset time:

- Take a quiet walk in nature, focusing on soothing sensory input like the rustling of leaves or the feel of grass underfoot
- Engage in a repetitive, calming activity like solving jigsaw puzzles or coloring mandalas
- Create a sensory cocoon with weighted blankets and soft textures, allowing yourself to simply rest
- Listen to white noise or nature sounds through noise-cancelling headphones
- Engage in your special interest in a low-pressure, sensory-friendly way
- Try mindfulness exercises specifically designed for sensory regulation, such as body scans or guided visualizations

Remember, the goal is to give your sensory system a chance to reset and prepare for future stimuli. Choose activities that feel calming and regulating for you personally.

## 6. Plan ahead

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Planning ahead is important because it can allow you to anticipate and prepare for challenging environments or situations.

By thinking through potential triggers and having strategies ready, you can reduce your anxiety and be better equipped to navigate potentially overwhelming experiences.

Some examples of planning ahead include:

- Previewing new environments or situations where possible
- Carrying a “sensory emergency kit” with items such as sunglasses, earplugs, and comforting objects
- Establishing exit strategies or finish times for overwhelming situations
- If you already have a hectic schedule, say no to additional plans or schedule in low sensory breaks
- Avoiding situations where you know you will feel overstimulated

For me, going to the supermarket is very overwhelming, especially when there are so many food options to choose from.

So, if I plan to go there, I try to have an idea in mind for what exactly I want to get. I plan my route out for the supermarket based on where my desired items are to limit the amount of time spent there.

## 7. Utilize personal strategies

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Try to keep in mind some personal strategies you can use in times when you start to feel overstimulated.

Some ideas of these include:

- **Mindfulness:** Engaging in mindfulness practices can help manage sensory overload.
- **Sensory Breaks:** Taking breaks in a calming environment, even for short periods, can help reduce sensory overload. This could involve finding a quiet space or engaging in calming activities.
- **Sensory Tools:** Using sensory tools like sunglasses, headphones, or fidget toys can help regulate sensory input and reduce overload.
- **Personal rating system:** Regularly check in with yourself about current stimulation levels and take action based on your personal threshold rating.

I often find it helpful to excuse myself for a few minutes if I am in an overwhelming social situation or in a noisy environment.

I can go to an outdoor space or the bathroom and take a few minutes to breathe deeply and close my eyes as a respite from sensory overload.

I also find it helpful to try some mindfulness exercises while I am taking this break. For instance, I might wash my hands in the bathroom and take my time massaging the soap into my hands and being aware of the feel of the water and the sound it makes coming out the faucet.

## How to support someone experiencing overstimulation

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Dan ([from the YouTube channel The Aspie World](#)), an autistic man, gives some advice that someone can use to support someone who is experiencing overstimulation (such as, if you are in a [relationship with someone who is autistic](#)):

- Remove the person from the overwhelming environment: This could involve turning off lights, moving to a quieter space, or going outside.
- Once the person is calmer, provide opportunities for them to engage in calming activities: This could include spending time in a sensory room, using sensory toys, or pursuing hobbies and interests.
- Dan suggests that sensory stimuli can be used in a positive way to help autistic people feel calm and relaxed: He provides examples such as bubble lamps, lava lamps, and fish tanks.

Other ways in which you can support them can include:

- Using clear and calm communication, avoiding complex language
- Not forcing verbal responses but encouraging alternative forms of communication (e.g., writing, typing, or gestures).
- Guide them through deep breathing exercises
- Respect their need for alone time if requested
- Allow time to recover without rushing
- Once recovered, discuss strategies for future situations

## References

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