

Sensory Assessment

Training Supplement

Dr. Ember Farnam, Occupational Therapist

Sensory processing isn't something that should only be addressed with certain diagnoses. We all have sensory needs, and every one of us tends to have a lower frustration tolerance when our brain is working harder to filter out sensory stimulus that is outside our comfort zone.

This assessment is loosely drawn from Dunn's Model of Sensory Processing. It addresses two continua within each sensory system.

1. Sensitivity

Someone's level of registration for a certain sensory stimulus depends on how intensely their brain receives the stimulus. For example, two people can be in the same room, hearing the same music over the speakers. However, one person may actually hear the music louder, or more intensely, than the other person is hearing it. When not attributed to physical hearing loss, this is because one person's brain is able to actually filter out some of the sound stimulus better than the other person's brain. Simply put, this is how much a person notices, or is aware of, a certain type of sensory input (attention/registration).

2. Preference



Sensory preference is measured on the second sensory continuum in this assessment. This measures how much the individual is drawn to the type of sensory input in consideration (behavior/reaction). Behaviors that seek or avoid certain sensory stimuli can be conscious (turning up the music volume) or unconscious (clenching fists). Whether conscious or unconscious, observable behaviors are clues to a person's sensory needs.

There is no optimal, good, or "normal" outcome in this assessment. This is a tool that is meant to help you to be able to understand that everyone experiences the world a little differently. Two people can experience the same exact environment, but with two completely different sensory experiences. For example, someone with high auditory (hearing) registration may become easily overwhelmed in an environment with lots of different sound stimulus, but they may also be the first one in the room to hear the familiar sound of a parent's car coming home from work from a block away.



Instructions:

1. Fill out the assessment to the best of your ability, according to your own sensory needs.
 - a. Each page addresses a different sensory system (i.e. touch, taste, smell).
 - b. Examples of each end of the spectrum are listed accordingly
2. Then, go through with a different color and fill it out according to someone you live with.
3. Notice the areas that have the most difference.
 - a. Are those items related to contexts that may have more tension or conflict in your household?
4. Now try out some of the environmental modifications.
 - a. Observe stress levels in your household, based on changes that you've implemented.
 - b. Make a note of modifications that help the dynamic in your household.
 - c. As you become more familiar with everyone's sensory needs, write in your own modification ideas.



Touch

Sensitivity		Preference	
			
<p><u>Low registration/doesn't notice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't notice if their face or hands are dirty • Tends to drop objects • may be perceived as clumsy, slow, or ambivalent • High pain tolerance 	<p><u>High registration/sensitive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readily notices textures of clothing/furniture • Likes things to be the "perfect temperature" • Is good at recognizing an object by feel 	<p><u>Avoiding/doesn't like touch</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cuts tags out of clothing • Prefers certain textures of food • Describes certain textures as "hurting" or "scratchy." • Only wears a certain type of clothes, i.e. seamless or sweat pants • Startles when touched, or doesn't like being touched • Avoids activities that involve getting hands dirty, such as playing with mud or play dough 	<p><u>Seeking/craves touch</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loves hugs, massages, or when people play with their hair • Always has a fidget or plays with whatever is in their hand, i.e. stretching hair ties, clicking a pen, or squeezing something soft • Chews their pencils • Rubs objects or puts them in their mouth • Likes being tickled or wrapped up like a burrito • Eats/drinks things extra hot or extra cold • Likes extra fizzy drinks or pop rocks



Taste and smell

Sensitivity 		Preference 	
<p><u>Low registration/doesn't notice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isn't always aware that food has gone bad • May have to put more salt/spice on their food in order to be able to taste it • Is the last to notice a smell 	<p><u>High/sensitive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often smells things that others cannot • Hyper-aware of tastes and smells 	<p><u>Avoiding/doesn't like strong tastes/smells</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefers less spicy food or less seasoning • Particular about certain foods that they eat • Actively avoids going into spaces with strong smells, such as perfume or candle stores 	<p><u>Seeking/craves strong tastes/smells</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoys putting more seasoning or spiciness on their food • Enjoys using scented candles and perfumes • Stops and smells things, such as flowers or coffee for prolonged periods of time



Hearing

Sensitivity		Preference	
			
<p><u>Low registration/doesn't notice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't notice little noises until someone points them out • Tends to have a louder voice • Doesn't always know when someone is talking to them 	<p><u>High/sensitive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notices the faintest of sounds in a room • Is able to pick out specific sounds, i.e. the sound of a parent's car coming home from work • Tends to overhear conversations from the other room • Notices when a faucet is dripping or a light is buzzing 	<p><u>Avoids sound</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequently covers their ears • Startles at loud sounds • Turns down the music/TV when concentrating • Gets distracted by a ticking clock or cars driving outside • Complains of their ears "hurting" at certain sounds 	<p><u>Seeks/craves sound</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tends to turn up music when they like the song • Louder music helps them relax • Makes sounds when there is silence



Visual

Sensitivity		Preference	
			
<p><u>Low registration/doesn't notice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to notice subtle changes in the lighting of a room • Usually doesn't notice when someone enters the room • Often doesn't "see" something right in front of them 	<p><u>High/sensitive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notices things that other people don't, such as florescent lights flickering • Knows what is going on outside the window • Gets distracted if the TV is on in the room • Is good at games, such as "I Spy" and puzzles • Is the first to notice an animal out the window or far away 	<p><u>Avoiding/doesn't like</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stressed out by clutter • Wears muted tones of clothing • Avoids crowded spaces or where there's a lot of movement • Gets overwhelmed with too much light • Closes eyes when thinking • Poor eye contact • Covers eyes 	<p><u>Seeking/craves</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likes to have all the lights on and curtains open • Prefers to wear brighter colors • Has the TV on while studying or concentrating • Enjoys decorating, hanging up lots of artwork on the walls

Movement

Sensitivity		Preference	
			
<p><u>Low registration/doesn't notice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can appear clumsy, may bump into objects or people around them • Trips over own feet or falls down often • Doesn't always notice that the car is moving • Sways or rocks back and forth to get their bearings 	<p><u>High/sensitive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always aware of movement, such as when the car starts rolling a little bit • Has good balance 	<p><u>Avoiding/doesn't like</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefers not to take the elevator • Gets motion sickness on boats/in the car • Avoids swings, slides, trampolines, or merry-go-rounds • May sit down when up high • Avoids amusement park rides 	<p><u>Seeking/craves</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spends all their time outside on swings, slide, trampoline, and merry-go-round • Likes to lean chair back on two legs • Likes to be swung around or thrown in the air • Enjoys the thrill of amusement park rides • Riding the elevator or escalator makes them happy • Enjoys jumping or spinning or rolling on the ground

Activity

Sensitivity		Preference	
			
<p><u>Low registration/doesn't notice</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shakes foot or shifts in seat while sitting • Bumps into others or stands too close to people in line • Runs into objects, falls out of chair • Trips over own feet or doorway thresholds when walking • Has poor posture • Poor coordination, compared to their peers 	<p><u>High/sensitive</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of body in space • Aware of where other's bodies are in their vicinity • Good coordination, compared to their peers 	<p><u>Avoiding/doesn't like exertion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefers elevator over taking the stairs • Able to sit very still • Prefers sitting over standing • Appears to have lower energy level than those around them • Almost as if moving in slow motion 	<p><u>Seeking/craves exertion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always "on the go," as if driven by a motor • Loves being physically active, i.e., dance, sports • Loves moving their body • Enjoys sports that involve running/jumping or kicking/throwing objects

Recommendations

	Low registration	High registration	Avoiding	Seeking
Touch	Accommodations: Put rougher textures on buttons or use items with raised buttons, rather than touch screen, use a mechanical keyboard, use non-glass tables and shatter resistant items Activities: Use a rough scrubby or brush for showers/bathing to wake up the senses	Accommodations: Allow to control temperature of bath water, allow control over food/tea, allow to brush own teeth, water without ice, choose own clothing	Accommodations: Clothing without zippers or Velcro, offer food options with separated ingredients, i.e. "deconstructed" burger, advocate about not liking to be touched/hugged Calming: Wear loose fitting clothing, take a bath	Calming: Use fidgets, such as chewies, fidget spinners, and water beads, take a shower, wear tighter clothing, pop-its Accommodations: Weighted items, such as blanket, vest, beanie baby, squeeze a squishy or silly putty to help with concentration Activities: create slime or make play-dough
Tastes/smells	Accommodations: Visual reminders or schedule for showers/hygiene, add extra spice/salt to food Activities: color with scented markers	Accommodations: Use a charcoal purifier to take smells out of the air, dust/clean study spaces regularly	Accommodations: Use a charcoal purifier to take smells out of the air, advocate for sensory needs, display signs that remind others to limit perfume and other strong scents Activities: Go for a walk in the fresh air	Accommodations: Allow individual to add extra spices/tastes to their food at mealtime Activities: Chew gum or suck hard candy when feeling restless, use flavored lip balm and scented lotions, make play-dough with Kool-Aid for fun smells Calming: Diffuse essential oil or burn a candle
Vision	Accommodations: Highlight important things, supplement learning/work with an e-reader, or other form of auditory learning, high-contrast/larger print materials, brighter lighting, i.e., lamps in corners, contrast on floors between rooms, high-contrast or reflective tape on edges of stairs, doorways, and countertop corners, where frequent tripping/bumping occurs	Accommodations: Reduce visual distractions, use blinders on sides of workspace, work facing a corner, or away from windows	Accommodations: Blackout curtains over windows, reduce clutter, few things hung on walls, turn off TV and other visually distracting things Calming: Dim lights, wear sunglasses or a baseball cap when in an overstimulating environment	Activities: Add lots of color/contrast to keep activities engaging, hang up many things on walls, decorate with own style, wear bright colors, do puzzles, make an ocean in a bottle or slime, add glitter. Calming: Watch a fish tank, lava lamp, or fidget spinner to relax, mandala coloring pages, glittery, shiny, or spinning objects
Sounds	Activities: Play a sound-guessing game, learn a musical instrument Accommodations: Use subtitles or connect headphones for shows/movies	Accommodations: Limit other sounds when communicating	Accommodations: Noise canceling headphones, earplugs, separate room for test-taking Carpeted spaces, cups/water bottles with rubber bottoms and non-glass/metal tables to limit unexpected sounds Calming: Turn down the volume to de-escalate, allow for quiet time on their own	Accommodations: Play background music for concentration, use white noise, fan, or quiet music to help sleep Calming: listen to rhythmic, bass-heavy music to de-escalate
Movement	Accommodations: Clear pathways, remove high thresholds where tripping occurs frequently, add rubber corners or pool noodles on edges of tables/counters where frequently bumped into	Activities: Shoulder strap or kinesio-tape to help with posture, do yoga Accommodations: Premedicate before a long trip with anti-nausea medication	Accommodations: Use a stable chair without wheels that doesn't lean or wiggle	Activities: gymnastics, swimming, amusement park rides, swings, slides Take movement breaks, do yoga Bounce on mini trampoline with standing desk or sit on an exercise ball to concentrate Use rocking chair, swing, or hammock to deescalate
Activity	Calming: Heavy work to center/ground oneself (i.e., yardwork or carry/drag something heavy) Accommodations: use a weighted lap pad for concentration Activities: Big, animal movements to wake up the body, backpack with weights, use wrist/ankle weights (short amount of time in the morning) to signal brain where the body is in space	Calming: Have a comfortable place in the office to sit and relax with comfortable chairs and beanbags Accommodations: Plan breaks	Accommodations: take frequent/short breaks during strenuous activity in order to rest, take the elevator rather than the stairs, plan for seating options	Accommodations: Under-desk pedals, foot rollers, or roll a tennis ball under feet while sitting, use a standing or sit-stand desk Calming: Body sock, trampoline break, or wall pushups Activities: Dance, gymnastics, track/field, soccer, yoga, weight lifting, step, and other gym classes

Tip Sheet

- ✓ Results will always be the most accurate if everyone you are comparing are filling out their own or if you have input from the person you are evaluating.
- ✓ Be aware that if someone is sensitive to a certain sensory stimulus does not always mean they will avoid it. That's why there are two spectrums for each sensory system.
- ✓ The examples in the boxes represent the extreme ends of each spectrum. If you, or the person you are evaluating doesn't meet all the criteria for one box, put yourself somewhere in the middle. Most people are going to fall somewhere in the middle on both spectrums of each sensory system.
- ✓ This assessment isn't meant to diagnose or treat anything, but just to bring your awareness to your own different sensory needs that you might not have been aware of, as well as the wide range of possibilities of different combinations of sensory processing needs. If you suspect that you or someone you know has a condition that impacts their ability to self-regulate, it's always a good idea to go to your family doctor, an occupational therapist, or another qualified professional for an evaluation.