

Supporting Adults with ADHD and Sensory Processing Differences

A guide for understanding your sensory experience and what can help

Adults with ADHD often experience sensory input differently than adults with sensory processing differences alone. ADHD affects attention, emotional regulation, and executive function, which changes how sensory information is noticed, interpreted, and acted on. Understanding this interaction can make daily life feel more manageable and less confusing.

How Sensory Experiences Differ When ADHD Is Involved

Adults with sensory differences alone often have clearer, more predictable patterns. Adults with ADHD + sensory differences may experience:

- **Inconsistent noticing** of sensory input—sometimes hyper-aware, sometimes unaware
- **Difficulty filtering background noise**, especially in busy or open spaces
- **Missing internal cues** like hunger, thirst, fatigue, or rising overwhelm
- **Faster escalation** because early signs of overload are harder to catch
- **Sensory seeking tied to alertness or emotional regulation**, not just comfort
- **Executive-function drain** when sensory load is high, making tasks harder to start or finish

These differences are neurological, valid, and common.

How Sensory Distress May Show Up

ADHD changes the expression of sensory discomfort. You may notice:

- Irritability or emotional flooding
- Impulsive reactions to discomfort (leaving abruptly, snapping, shutting down)
- Difficulty identifying what's wrong until overload is already high
- Avoidance of tasks that require focus in high-sensory environments
- Masking sensory distress at work or socially, followed by burnout

Adults with sensory differences alone may show discomfort more directly—avoiding certain sensations or environments without the added layer of attention dysregulation.

Why Self-Regulation Feels Different

ADHD affects interoception and emotional regulation, which means:

- Early signs of overload are harder to notice
- It's difficult to pause long enough to use a strategy
- External cues (timers, reminders, routines) are often needed
- Shame or frustration may arise when sensory needs disrupt productivity

Adults with sensory differences alone may use coping tools more consistently and recognize patterns earlier.

How You Can Support Yourself

Adults with ADHD + sensory differences benefit from supports that address both sensory needs and executive-function needs.

- **Adjust your environment:** soften lighting, reduce clutter, manage noise
- **Use movement-based regulation:** pacing, stretching, rocking, walking meetings
- **Build predictable routines:** consistent sleep, meals, transitions, work blocks
- **Use external cues:** timers, reminders, visual anchors, checklists
- **Keep sensory tools accessible:** headphones, sunglasses, textured items
- **Support interoception:** scheduled breaks, hydration reminders, body scans
- **Practice simple self-advocacy:** “I focus better with less noise”
- **Use self-compassion:** sensory overload is a body response, not a personal failure

Adults with sensory differences alone may rely more on identifying triggers, using tools consistently, and adjusting environments without needing as much executive-function scaffolding.

The Heart of It

Adults with sensory differences alone need **sensory-specific supports**.

Adults with ADHD + sensory differences need **sensory supports + executive-function scaffolding + emotional regulation support**, because these systems interact constantly.

Understanding this interaction can reduce shame, increase comfort, and make daily life feel more workable.

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