

## **Supporting Teens with ADHD and Sensory Processing Differences**

*A guide for parents and caregivers*

Teens with ADHD often experience sensory input differently *and* have challenges with attention, impulse control, emotional regulation, and executive function. These systems interact, which means their support needs look different from teens with sensory differences alone.

### **Sensory Experiences in Teens With ADHD**

Teens with sensory differences alone often have clearer, more predictable patterns. Teens with ADHD + sensory differences experience more variability because attention and regulation influence how sensory input is processed. You may notice:

- Inconsistent awareness of sensory triggers
- Difficulty filtering background noise in classrooms and social spaces
- Missing internal cues like hunger, fatigue, or rising overwhelm
- Faster escalation because early signs are overlooked

### **How Distress and Coping Look Different**

ADHD changes how sensory discomfort is expressed. You may see:

- Impulsivity or big movement when overloaded
- Emotional reactivity or shutdowns after masking all day
- Task avoidance that is actually sensory + executive-function overload
- Difficulty identifying what's wrong until it's "too late"

Teens with sensory differences alone may show discomfort more directly—avoiding textures, withdrawing, or using known strategies.

### **Differences in Self-Regulation**

By adolescence, teens are expected to self-manage more. ADHD makes this harder.

Teens with ADHD + sensory differences often need:

- External cues to pause, reset, or take breaks
- Help slowing down enough to use a strategy
- Support noticing early signs of overwhelm
- Co-regulation when emotions escalate
- Tools that are easy to access and hard to lose

Teens with sensory differences alone may use tools more consistently and recognize triggers earlier.

## **Executive Function Adds Another Layer**

ADHD affects planning, organization, and follow-through. This means sensory supports alone are not enough.

Teens with ADHD + sensory differences may struggle with:

- Remembering to use sensory tools
- Packing or locating tools (headphones, sunglasses, fidgets)
- Transitioning between classes or activities
- Managing sensory load in fast-paced environments
- Completing tasks when sensory discomfort and EF demands collide

## **Social and Emotional Considerations**

Teen years bring complex social expectations. ADHD changes how sensory needs affect identity and confidence.

You may notice:

- More social misinterpretations (“too intense,” “too distracted”)
- More shame around sensory needs (feel immature or different)
- Difficulty advocating in the moment (because they lose track of what they need in the moment)
- Burnout from masking sensory and ADHD challenges (school overwhelm, social challenges)

## **How You Can Support Your Teen**

- Help them identify early signs of overload
- Build predictable routines and visual anchors
- Offer movement-based regulation options
- Environmental modifications or accommodations to help them cope in overloading places
- Keep sensory tools accessible and easy to carry
- Support self-advocacy with simple scripts
- Validate their experience without judgment
- Help adapt social experiences to match sensory needs
- Create calm, low-demand reset spaces at home

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