



Natural Learning Concepts

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The Sensory Challenge

(In honor of Occupational Therapists and people with autism)

Take the Sensory Challenge. Are you ready? Good. Close your eyes and imagine this:

You're in a room with a group of people. You're trying to listen to the speaker but there is a buzz in your ears. It's so loud you wonder if there's a fly in your head. The lights in the room are continually flickering. You keep blinking to avoid the flashes. Now you have a headache.

Open your eyes. How did you feel? What did the speaker say?

This is the effect fluorescent lights have on some people with autism

You're watching a puppet show. There are people next to you, in front of you and behind you. The noise level is loud. There are people laughing all around you. One of the puppets has a shrill voice. It echoes in your head and you don't understand what the puppets are saying. You try and filter out the sound but it's impossible. You are continually startled as the audience breaks into applause, clapping and cheering wildly for no apparent reason. In desperation you cover your ears and squeeze your eyes shut hoping it will all just go away.

Open your eyes. How did you feel? Did you enjoy the show?

This is the effect typical noise levels might have on some people with autism.

You're at a BBQ. The sun is hot. The heat makes your skin prickle and the light is blinding. Your friends call you to play ball but there is a haze in front of your eyes. You try and push it away with your hands. Why can't anybody else see it? The sound of insects is all around. You see them wherever you turn. They're on the leaves, in the sky and on the grass. You should be eating but you feel nauseated. The air is permeated with the smell of food, drinks, lotion and smoke from the grill. It's overpowering and all you can do is nibble on some chips.

Open your eyes. How did you feel? Did you participate in the BBQ?

This is how a summer day event can feel to someone who has autism

You enjoy playing basketball but today you have to wear your team clothes. The socks are rough and they hurt your feet. With each step, the seam slides across your toes and it's awfully painful. You're on the court and you miss the ball. You didn't see it because you were trying to reposition your shirt. The label on the inside feels like a jagged piece of paper that constantly grazes your skin. You can't shoot the ball in the hoop because you're rooted to the spot. Your shoes are so uncomfortable, you're afraid to jump in fear of the painful landing that's bound to happen. Your team is really mad at you.

Open your eyes. How did you feel? Did you enjoy the game?

This is the effect that some clothing can have on a person with autism.

You like eating cereal. It's crunchy and it tastes good. You like eating yogurt. It's smooth and creamy. Oh no! Somebody wants you to combine them! They think you should mix it up and eat them together. The very thought of lumpy and smooth swirling around in your mouth makes you physically gag. At your request they leave it separate but still put them on the same plate! How could you possibly eat? You feel physically ill looking at the lumpy and smooth on your plate. It reminds you of... of... Oatmeal! The King of all lumpy, smooth mixtures. Your stomach is churning and you need to throw up. You close your eyes and pray that the plate in front of you will magically disappear.

Open your eyes. How did you feel? Did you enjoy your breakfast?

This is the effect that some foods can have on a person with autism.



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You're at the mall. It's a large wide open space where everything echoes. Your skin begins to tingle. There are sights and sounds everywhere. You don't know where to look first. Your mind is reeling. You're afraid and you feel exposed. You long for protection. You want to swaddle yourself in a blanket and pretend you're in a cocoon. People whiz by. Their footsteps and chatter reverberate in your head. You lose sense of yourself and the space around you. You wonder if your feet are on the floor or if you've merged with the mall. In sheer terror, you retreat in the far corners of your mind – a safe place that never fails you.

Open your eyes. How did you feel? Was the mall fun?

This is the effect busy places might have on people with autism.

If you have autism we respect and commend you for dealing so well with situations that can feel unbearable. If you're an occupational therapist, we honor you for the wonderful work you do in helping people with autism deal with sensory challenges.

- By Jene Aviram

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