

# *The Seven Senses* *Hearing (Auditory)*



Autistic people experience the world differently from others. Sensory issues arising from autism are a well-known aspect of the condition, and in particular hypersensitivity (increased sensitivity) in one or more senses occurs frequently in autistic people. When you sense the world differently to others you inevitably react and behave differently as well.

Autism affects every person differently and in a way which is unique to that individual person. Similarly, the reactions of everyone on the spectrum are personal and should be supported in a manner that benefits the individual in their own unique way.

## **Let's take a look at 1 of the seven senses - Hearing (Auditory)**

### **Over sensitivity to sound (hyper-responsive)**

#### **Types of issues possible:**

- May find it hard to filter and process the sounds they hear, particularly if there are many different sounds at the same time.

- May be highly sensitive to volume, so that sudden loud noises can cause them pain.
- May find particular pitches or types of sound difficult irrespective of volume, such as many voices in a crowded room or what may be generally considered as background noise like air conditioning, projectors humming, or cutlery tapping on a plate or the table.

### **Potential impacts on life:**

- May find busy or noisy environments very difficult or painful to deal with if the noises are those to which they are particularly sensitive and will want to leave the location to escape the over stimulation.
- Someone who has difficulty filtering out many voices heard at once will struggle to focus in a crowded place where lots of people are talking, such as a shopping centre or an open plan office.
- Someone who cannot tolerate the hum of machinery will be unable to focus while exposed to such a sound.
- Those that react badly to sudden loud noises may find it impossible to carry on normally for a period during and after such noises.

## **How to help and provide support:**

- Avoid exposure to environments that cause them pain or difficulty.
- This may be accomplished either by blocking out the sounds, for example with ear plugs or headphones, or visiting places when they are quieter.
- Some may make noises themselves, such as humming or whistling, to drown out the sounds they are finding difficult, which can be encouraged and explained to others around.
- An autistic person with hyper-sensitivity to sound who is regularly expected to work in a noisy classroom or open plan office will certainly need some form of support to function to their full potential, either in managing the sounds around them or by being given a quieter space to work. If the latter is adopted, it is important to accompany this with other measures to avoid isolating them from co-workers or fellow students.



## **Reduced sensitivity to sound (hypo-responsive)**

### **Types of issues possible:**

May try to listen to types of sounds to which they have reduced sensitivity at higher volumes to get the audio stimulation that they need.

### **Potential impacts on life:**

May be driven to seek out the audible stimulation that they need, for example by visiting noisy funfairs regularly just to benefit from the sounds even if they have no great interest in the funfair itself.

### **How to help and provide support:**

May need help with identifying and safely accessing the stimulation they need. For example, if someone benefits from fairground noises rather than the whole fairground experience, could a recording serve the same purpose, or can other more accessible alternatives be identified and implemented?

## **Environmental meaning deafness**

### **Types of issues possible:**

Cannot remember the meaning of audio signals like a bell ringing at a mealtime even if they have heard it many times before.

### **Potential impacts on life:**

May not respond to audio cues, which is especially problematic with danger signals like fire and evacuation alarms, as well as creating difficulties with more day to day tasks like school bells.

### **How to help and provide support:**

A friendly spoken prompt when the sound is heard such as “there goes the bell, it’s dinner time” can be enormously helpful.

### **Meaning deafness**

#### **Types of issues possible:**

Struggles to understand words beyond the first 3 or 4 spoken in a phrase.

#### **Potential impacts on life:**

May find it hard to follow lengthy sentences or instructions. For example, if given a series of directions will likely only remember the first step.

#### **How to help and provide support:**

Use short, direct sentences to convey the meaning as succinctly as possible and one step at a time. Write down sets of instructions in steps if possible.

## **Tonal deafness**

### **Types of issues possible:**

Finds it hard to draw meaning from tone or inflection of the voice.

### **Potential impacts on life:**

- May misunderstand things like sarcasm and irony, and take words more literally than intended, particularly if tone or body language is used to convey the actual intended meaning.
- May fail to identify moods and emotions if not conveyed by the words spoken, such as someone saying they are happy while showing with tone and body language that they are not.

### **How to help and provide support:**

- Say exactly what you mean and try not to rely on interpretation of how you say it or your body language to get the full meaning.
- Encourage and welcome questions of clarification, even if it seems obvious to you.

