

The Seven Senses

Smell (Olfactory)



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 - Smell (Olfactory)

Increased sensitivity to smell (avoiders)

Types of issues possible:

- May detect smells that others cannot sense and have a much stronger experience of smells around them.
- For example, they may smell the type of shampoo someone has used on their hair or experience a strong aroma from a cleaning product used on a floor.

Potential impacts on life:

- May find it difficult to spend time in places where there is a smell that they find strong or unpleasant.
- As others may not even be able to detect the smell at all, this can make their discomfort hard to understand, particularly if the autistic person is unable to communicate what the issue is.
- For example, a young child may resist going into a certain shop or other place because they associate it with an unpleasant aroma but cannot tell their parents this and wonder why no one else has the same problem.

How to help and provide support:

Avoiding the places that are difficult or taking steps to reduce the smell where possible, such as increased ventilation or using different cleaning products, may be of assistance.



Reduced sensitivity to smell (seekers)

Types of issues possible:

- May be drawn to strong aromas to stimulate their sense of smell.
- May go out of their way to experience strong scents like curry powder or perfume, and may approach people to smell their skin or hair.

Potential impacts on life:

- Can cause difficulties socially, particularly if approaching other people to smell them who do not understand or appreciate their condition and may feel threatened.
- May miss important warning signals from smells, such as smoke, gas or food that has gone off. If an autistic person has trouble sensing or identifying such smells, they could be in avoidable danger at times without assistance.

How to help and provide support:

- Educating others that they meet, explaining why the behaviour takes place and that there is no harmful intent.
- Awareness of those regularly around the person that warning smells may be missed.