

EATING DISORDERS



NEURODIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

SENSORY ACCESSIBILITY GUIDE FOR HEALTH SERVICES

No-cost or Immediately Actionable
Adjustments for Inclusive Care





Why It Matters

Unmet sensory needs can create significant barriers to care for many neurodivergent (ND) individuals, including autistic and ADHD people. Sensory overwhelm can impact a person's ability to communicate effectively, process information, or tolerate clinical environments, often resulting in incomplete or inaccurate assessments and poorer health outcomes.

Making small, no-cost adjustments can greatly improve comfort, felt safety, and engagement – benefitting all clients through universal design principles.



Scope

This resource is designed for clinicians and frontline staff across hospital and community settings.

It lists reasonable adjustments that require no additional funding and can be implemented immediately to make healthcare environments more accessible and supportive for people with sensory processing differences.

The table below is organised by sensory system.

- **Helpful Habits to Embed in Everyday Practice** – simple, universal strategies that can benefit all clients and help create a more inclusive and accessible environment, as well as improve overall healthcare experience.
- **Individualised Adjustments** – actions to use when a client identifies specific sensory needs or sensitivities. These adjustments can be discussed and adapted collaboratively to support comfort, engagement, and safety in care.

Clinicians may also wish to share the companion Sensory Access Guide for Clients, which helps clients identify the adjustments that would make the biggest difference for them and bring this information to appointments.

Sensory Accessibility Guide

Sensory System	Client Experiences May Include...	Helpful Habits to Embed in Everyday Practice	Individualised Adjustments
 <p>VISION Light & Visuals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sensitivity to fluorescent or overhead lighting ○ Discomfort from glare, visual clutter, or bright/high-traffic areas ○ Difficulty with sudden changes in brightness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask about light sensitivities ○ Ask before turning on overhead lights ○ Warn if lighting cannot be adjusted ○ Actively normalise and support the use of hats, tinted glasses, or sunglasses as valid sensory supports ○ Choose calmer, less visually busy spaces when possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Dim or turn off ceiling lights ○ Use lamps or natural light ○ Offer seating facing away from bright light sources or visually stimulating areas ○ Use a different space with softer or natural lighting if possible
 <p>HEARING Sound & Noise</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Distress from sudden or repetitive sounds (alarms, monitors) ○ Difficulty filtering background noise from conversation ○ Misophonia or sound-triggered distress ○ Note: sounds don't have to be loud to be distressing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask about noise sensitivity and specific sounds which trigger distress (e.g. misophonic triggers) ○ Put duress alarms on vibrate during consultations ○ Silence phones and computer ○ Adjust your speech to meet client's needs ○ Normalise use of noise-cancelling headphone, including for staff who need them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offer to turn off radio/TV in the waiting area ○ Allow waiting outside if no quiet area available ○ Turn off noisy fans or aircon if disruptive ○ Stop ticking clocks or store them temporarily ○ Turn off HR monitor sounds if safe ○ Provide disposable earplugs ○ Encourage clients to bring ear defenders or noise-cancelling headphones

Sensory System	Client Experiences May Include...	Helpful Habits to Embed in Everyday Practice	Individualised Adjustments
 <p>SMELL Olfactory</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nausea or dizziness triggered by particular cleaning products, detergents, perfumes, or other scents ○ Sensory overload from intense experience of odours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask about scent sensitivities ○ Avoid wearing perfume, aftershave, or scented lotion ○ Avoid the use of air diffusers, potpourri, or scented candles ○ Minimise cleaning sprays before appointments ○ Warn if strong odours are present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offer to meet outside, open a window or turn on the fan if possible ○ In hospitals, use antibacterial soap rather than hand sanitiser ○ If sanitiser is used, step back until scent dissipates ○ Allow clients to wear masks or use a familiar scent to mask odours
 <p>TOUCH Tactile</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Distress with unexpected touch or certain textures (e.g. linen, gown) ○ Sensitivity to temperature changes or materials ○ Feeling overstimulated by light or firm touch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask about tactile sensitivities ○ Gain consent and check readiness each time touch is necessary (e.g., when taking blood pressure) ○ Always explain the rationale for touch or physical contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offer alternatives (e.g. self-apply stethoscope or electrodes) ○ Allow clients to keep jackets, weighted items, or blankets ○ Allow clients to bring their own bedding supplies for hospital stays if desired
 <p>MOVEMENT & BALANCE Proprioception & Vestibular</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Need to move, fidget, or change position to stay regulated ○ Discomfort when movement is restricted ○ Dizziness or disorientation with changes in body position ○ Sensitivity to tilting, spinning, or certain movements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask about movement needs ○ Offer choice of sitting location (e.g. swivel chair, static chair, or floor if safe) ○ Normalise different seating or movement needs (e.g. standing, pacing) ○ Encourage clients to move, stretch, or stand up as needed during appointments (if medically safe to do so) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide sitting options that allow movement (e.g. swivel chairs, gym ball, rocking chair) ○ Allow extra time for postural transitions ○ Build in the option for short movement breaks during longer appointments.

Sensory System	Client Experiences May Include...	Helpful Habits to Embed in Everyday Practice	Individualised Adjustments
 <p>INTEROCEPTION Internal Sensing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Difficulty recognising or reporting pain, hunger, temperature, or other body signals ○ May under- or over-report physical sensations ○ May appear uncertain or inconsistent when describing discomfort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Validate and normalise differences in body awareness ○ Validate client reports without minimising or questioning their accuracy ○ Ask descriptive questions (e.g. "What does it feel like?" rather than "How bad is it?") ○ Offer multiple ways to describe sensations – not just numbers ○ Normalise taking time to identify and communicate body sensations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use visual or analogy-based tools (e.g. colour, shape, or weather metaphors to express intensity or quality) ○ Provide body maps for noting sensations between appointments ○ Allow clients to use written notes or drawings if describing sensations verbally is difficult ○ Allow extra time to process and describe sensations ○ Revisit body comfort regularly during longer sessions
 <p>MULTI-SENSORY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Overload from multiple sensory inputs or unpredictable environments ○ Fatigue or distress during long or intense procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Proactively ask about sensory needs and preferred adjustments at the start of care ○ Validate sensory distress as a legitimate accessibility need ○ Offer choice and predictability whenever possible (e.g. explain procedures and describe environments in advance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Allow support people, comfort items, or assistive tech ○ When possible, book appointments at times or in spaces with lower sensory load (e.g. less crowded, reduced noise) ○ Offer breaks if signs of sensory overload appear ○ Provide extra time after sensory-intense procedures for regulation or recovery ○ Encourage clients to identify and record preferred adjustments for future visits



Implementation Tips

- **Ask routinely:** “Do you have any sensory preferences or sensitivities I should be aware of to make this appointment more comfortable?”
- **Document preferences:** Note agreed adjustments in the client’s file for continuity of care.
- **Model inclusion:** Visible sensory awareness encourages colleagues to adopt similar practice.
- **Recognise overlap:** Many of these adjustments support clients with trauma histories, chronic pain, anxiety, or other disabilities – not only those who identify as neurodivergent.