

Understanding Sensory Processing Differences

It is estimated that approximately ten percent of the population has a significant issue with tolerating sensory input, which impacts how we adapt to the environment and people around us. For those us with sensory processing sensitivity, many sensory experiences are annoying at best and are often experienced as overwhelming, painful, or frightening.

Many who live with autism, obsessive compulsive disorder, cerebral palsy, post-traumatic stress, or have suffered physical and sexual abuse have difficulty tolerating ordinary sensory input. People with medical conditions such as arthritis and fibromyalgia often experience touch as painful, even from typical actions such as handshakes or hugs. Sensory processing differences can occur in one or more sensory categories including touch, sound, sight, smell, or motion.

Just as some of us have better vision or hearing than others, some of us process sensory input more easily than others. You cannot “will” yourself to see or hear better and those with sensory processing differences cannot “will” themselves to better process sensory experiences. This is a neurological condition, and we just can’t “get over it”.

Here are some ways some of us perceive various sensory experiences:

- Touch, even by wind from a fan, can seem like a physical attack
- A sudden noise can feel like extreme danger
- A specific smell or food texture can elicit gagging, nausea, or vomiting
- Bright light can be painful and lead to agitation and headaches
- Certain movements can be very frightening, causing fear responses

What happens is the sensory experiences are received by the part of the brain that reacts in ways that keep us safe. These inputs trigger our fight or flight system and we either run (or want to run) or we get ready to defend ourselves. Children’s reactions can look like bad behavior when they are simply responding to sensations that are unpleasant at best, scary, painful, and/or dangerous at worst.

For adults who must cope and function in daily life this hypersensitivity can take a great toll. Being on edge, irritable, nervous, developing headaches, and avoiding social settings are just a few of the responses that have to be constantly managed while just living our lives.

That said, sensitivity is also a strength that helps us notice triggers and understand children perceived as over-reacting. We excel at designing spaces and selecting furnishings that create a calming and comfortable church environment for all of us.

Our congregations can help if they understand that this is very real. You can:

- Be accepting of those with increased sensory sensitivity, understanding that this is just another aspect of human diversity.
- Ask before initiating touch: “May I give you a hug?” or “Can I shake your hand?”
- Ask if there are things you can do to make the church a safe place for everyone to participate.
- Offer alternatives within your worship services or other events for those who need to move around, have decreased noise, light, or activity, or need more personal space.
- Provide a sensory break area.
- Ask for help from your conference Disability Ministries Team or email information@umcdmc.org.

