The Prevalence of Sensory Processing Disorder Among Those with ADHD

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Understanding the Connection Between Sensory Overload and ADHD

Imagine that you are trying to complete a simple task such as shopping for groceries. You have come prepared, armed with a shopping list and have secured a cart. As you walk down the aisles, searching for the products on your list, you cannot help but notice several things at once. The overhead fluorescent lighting is too bright and flickers intermittently. The supermarket is too noisy as music harshly blares through tinny speakers and the incessant chatter of staff and other shoppers. One of the wheels of the cart is slightly defective and steering has become more challenging. Suddenly you begin to feel overwhelmed by all the distractions and overloaded by the constant stimuli. Panic starts to build and even though you have only collected a few items on your list, you cut the shopping trip short, quickly dashing to the checkout and using the last of your energy to remain calm. This is an example of sensory overload for ADHD.

ADHD and Sensory Processing Disorder

Sensory processing disorder (SPD) is a neurological condition that makes it hard to process and take action on the information received from the senses. For people with SPD, especially children, certain stimuli can feel like an assault of the senses. Or, the opposite effect can occur where outside stimuli are dulled, muting sights, sounds, smell, taste and touch.

The SPD Spectrum

SPD can be considered as a spectrum, with sensory avoidance on one far end and sensory seeking on the other end. A sensory balance or norm would be on the central point. Although ADHD and SPD are distinct and different diagnoses, there is a large percentage of people with both ADHD and SPD. A recent study from the University of Colorado suggests that up to 40% of children with ADHD also have sensory issues, which is an extremely high level of co-occurrences.

What Is a Sensory Overload?

Sensory overload is the overstimulation of one or more of the body’s five senses, such as touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. Most people are already familiar with these first five senses, but there are two more. Vestibular is the sense that deals with movement and balance, and perceptive is the sense that controls your body’s awareness and where you are in space.

If the input or stimuli is more than your brain can sort through and process, it becomes overwhelming. Triggers are different for everyone, but sensory overload might occur due to multiple conversations occurring at once, strong odors, or the certain textures of clothing.

Sensory overload can affect anyone but is commonly reported as a problem for people with autism, post-traumatic stress disorder and ADHD. It is characterized by inattentiveness and hyperactivity, creating difficulty with processing and prioritizing sensory information, which contributes to emotional and behavioral issues.

Symptoms of Sensory Overload

When stimuli are too much for the senses a sensory overload can occur. When one or more of these systems is overwhelmed, your body and brain can begin what is essentially known as a shutdown sequence. All of your energy is suddenly focused on remaining calm and attempting to shut out the feeling of being overwhelmed. Sometimes it may be impossible to remain in control and a public meltdown may occur.

Symptoms of sensory overload:

- Panic attacks or severe anxiety responses, such as increased heart rate, sweating and breathing
- Difficulty focusing or concentrating on conversations or surroundings
- Extreme restlessness
- Muscular tension
- Headaches or migraines
- Urge to cover ears/eyes or otherwise shield yourself from sensory input
- Extreme irritability
- Discomfort and irritability
- Difficulty sleeping
- Mood changes
- Meltdowns

Meltdowns can involve shouting, swearing, or a tactile sensation of banging a fist into the ground or wall. These actions may appear as further overwhelming a bodily system, but it is a means of taking back control of a sensation.

Treatment for SPD and Sensory Overload

The most common treatment for toddlers and kids with SPD is to work with an occupational therapist who can do an assessment to develop a sensory profile for the child, working with them to address their sensory needs and develop coping skills. Sensory integration therapy can help organize a child’s brain and the sensory input they receive. They may also work on desensitization which can be a useful tool to help children build up tolerance to overwhelming stimuli.

While there is no specific treatment for sensory overload, occupational therapy can assist in reducing the severity of symptoms. Occupational therapists can help people make changes to their environments and learn to manage reactions. Certain techniques individuals can try:

- Knowing what situations, activities, or events might trigger a sensory overload
- Reducing sensory inputs where possible
- Identifying a safe space to escape to when sensory overload occurs at school or work
- Taking regular breaks
- Discussing sensory overload with colleagues, teachers and others, and asking for support in reducing sensory inputs
- Sleeping, hydrating and eating regularly

Talk to Your Doctor

It is recommended that people who experience regular episodes of sensory overload consult their doctor. Your doctor can provide support, recommend treatments and determine if there is also a co-occurring condition that requires additional treatment.