FASD Tip Sheet for Caregivers

FASD and sensory overwhelm

Sometimes people can be overwhelmed by their surroundings.

The lights can be too bright, the crowd can be too loud, clothes can be too scratchy...

These are all examples of **sensory overwhelm**, which is a heightened response to an external source that many people living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) experience.

Sensory overwhelm can be experienced by many people when they are tired or stressed out, but this is a daily occurrence for some people living with FASD, Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), etc.

TIP **The best way to help is to be open-minded, patient, and creative with your solutions and accommodations.**

Sensory overwhelm happens when:

Sights, sounds, smells, textures, tastes, or other sensations become **too much** for a person to comfortably process all at once.

Many people call it by different names, such as:

- Sensory overload
- Sensory processing difficulties
- Individual sensory preferences
- Sensory fatigue
- And others

These are all examples of **sensory overwhelm**, which is a heightened response to an external source that many people living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) experience.

Remember, not everyone experiences **sensory overwhelm** the same, so accommodations may look different for each person.

For example, one person may prefer tight sleeves while another may prefer flowy sleeves. One person may love loud music while another may prefer total silence.

FASD Bridging Connections

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FASD Tip Sheet for Caregivers

FASD and Sensory Overwhelm

Common triggers and responses, and how to address them

People may experience and communicate their sensory overwhelm differently, depending on their environment, processing capacity, routine, and more.

Some common triggers to look out for, and how to address them are as follows:

1. Loud noises

Bangs, yells, crowds, intense music, or even the hum of the fridge or air conditioner, etc. can be triggering for those with sensitivities to loud noises.

> **Responses:** Covering ears, grimacing at each sound, shutting down, or irritability.

Try: Use noise-cancelling headphones, remove irritable sounds, turn off machines that hum, or find a designated quiet space for your loved one to retreat to.

2. Bright or flickering lights

Have you ever been in a room where a light was flickering and it gave you a headache? This is extremely common for people who experience sensory overwhelm. It can also be due to the brightness, directness, or even the colour of the lights. Sometimes, even the sun is irritating!

> **Responses:** Covering their eyes, squinting, headaches, or frustration.

Try: Use soft lighting (such as lamps or plug-in nightlights), replace white light bulbs with yellow light bulbs (or whatever colour your loved one might prefer), wear sunglasses (or transition lenses for glasses-wearers), or take multiple sensory breaks to avoid overload.

3. Uncomfortable textures

For many people, especially those living with FASD, textures can be overwhelming — both from clothing and the environment. Fabrics, tags, tight sleeves, or itchy materials can feel unbearable, and even grass or sand can be triggering. The right clothing can help reduce those sensations.

> **Responses:** Complaining, fidgeting, scratching, playing with or removing clothes, or appearing agitated.

Try: Choose preferred fabrics and stick to those when shopping. Offer loose, breathable options. Some people may also want to wear long sleeves or pants to avoid direct contact with grass, dirt, or other uncomfortable textures outside.

4. Food avoidance

No, they are not picky eaters! Sometimes sensory overwhelm leads to avoidance of food, due to sight, smell, texture, taste, and even sound.

> **Responses:** Refusing to eat, gagging, tearing up while eating, smelling everything before eating, becoming nauseous from smells, emotional responses.

Try: Don't force them! Learn your loved one's preferences; while we all must have diverse diets, incorporate the safe, nutritious foods that your loved one consistently enjoys.

For example, if they dislike leafy greens, offer carrots or potatoes. If they dislike red meat, accommodate them with leaner options. When you switch foods, choose ones that have a different texture. Foods that feel the same can be tough for people living with FASD to eat, so rice pudding may not be a good stand-in for oatmeal.

For more information, scan the QR code to visit mnacfs.com/bridgingconnections or email us at FASD@metis.org

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