

# Low Sensory Events and Information

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## What is the purpose of low sensory events?

There are many groups of people for whom low sensory events are beneficial or even necessary. This resource addresses low sensory events in the context of Autism.

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects cognitive, sensory, and social processing, changing the way people see the world and interact with others.

Many autistic people may experience sensory differences, including sensory sensitivity or overload when there are many sensory factors in the environment. This can mean that even in ordinary, day to day environments, autistic people can find themselves unable to function, extremely overwhelmed, or even in pain due to their nervous system taking in too much stimulation.

When even day to day activities can be overwhelming, events that are meant to be fun are often inaccessible for autistic people because they usually involve more noise, more people, or just more going on in general.

This is why quiet hours or low sensory sessions can be beneficial. It creates opportunities for the autistic community (and others who have similar difficulties) to participate in life without the same level of overwhelm.

## Things to consider

If you are considering holding a low sensory session, it's important to understand that what most people consider tolerable in terms of stimulation, may not necessarily be manageable for people who have sensory sensitivities. For example, many autistic people can hear lights or electricity. Their senses are often significantly heightened. So, it can be helpful to get input from autistic people if you can.

- **Lighting:** Can lights be dimmed or turned off (while maintaining safety)? If you're holding a show or concert that has lots of flashing lights, consider holding a session where these are reduced or at least not directed at the audience.
- **Sound:**
  - Minimise sound including background music, cash registers, any beeping or other background noise.
  - Hold events in smaller groups to reduce noise from the crowd.
  - Instead of clapping for applause, use sign language.
  - Avoid any sudden noises.
- **Visual stimulation:** Too much to take in all at once can be overwhelming. Consider how to simplify the visual environment.
- **Clear pathways:** Clear signage, including obvious exits and bathrooms. It's really common for autistic people to use the bathroom as a sensory break without having to leave the event, especially in venues where breakout spaces aren't available.

- Breakout spaces: Is it possible to have a separate quiet space if someone becomes overwhelmed? This space could have calming items in it such as a weighted blanket or fidget toys. You could have a beanbag, or somewhere for the person to hide for a bit. If you're putting on a show or concert, if you have the capacity to offer the option for people to still be able to watch the show on a screen somewhere quieter while they get a break, that can be useful as well. However, this should be separate to the quiet space as this would still produce noise and would mean that others who need to escape the noise wouldn't have anywhere to go.
- Limited numbers: Consider limiting guest/client/customer numbers during the low sensory session
- Sensory kits: Consider providing sensory tools such as earmuffs, noise-cancelling headphones, fidget equipment and Social Stories, as appropriate
- Alternative seating options. Some autistic people prefer being able to move around or sit on the floor. Sitting still in regular chairs can be quite difficult.
- Training: Ensure that staff members have a good understanding of autism, sensory needs and appropriate responses

## **Note on Terminology**

When holding any event for any particular community it's important to make sure you're respecting the preferred terminology of that community. For example, you'll see we refer to autistic people rather than 'people with autism'. If you are holding a low sensory event and wish to mention that it's for the autistic community, Autism NZ can provide an additional resource that briefly outlines their preferred terminology.