Sensory sensitivity and the working environment.

The importance of a working environment is often overlooked, but it can affect many things, including our productivity, focus, mood state, energy levels, and safety.

What is sensory sensitivity?

Sensory sensitivity is more common in neurodiversity than in the rest of the population. A person may experience both hyper (too much) and hypo (too little) sensitivity. Not all people with sensory sensitivity will be neurodivergent.

Sensory sensitivity can affect people in different ways including:

- Stress and anxiety
- Overwhelm, meltdown, and shutdowns
- Headaches and migraines
- Pain or physical discomfort
- Fatigue
- Increased distraction
- Irritability.

Sources of sensory sensitivity in the workplace.

Lighting.

Neurodiverse individuals are often sensitive to light levels and their intensity. Flickering lights can also be very distracting.

What can help?

- They may prefer working in natural or slightly lower lighting than their peers.
- Having dimmable lighting and access to desk lamps can be helpful and gives more local control.
- Have their workstation away from triggers.

Brightness.

This is similar to lighting but looks at the bigger picture of colours of walls, sunlight and glare, for example. If a person is looking at white walls which have the sun streaming in onto them, this will feel much brighter with the likelihood of glare, than a muted coloured wall in a room where there are blinds which can block any bright sunlight.

What can help?

- Bright colours and patterns may need to be avoided as they can cause images to shimmer which can trigger migraines, for example.

Noise.

Many neurodivergent people talk about being unable to filter out background noise, such as conversations and sounds that others don't hear. For example, the hum from fridges, lighting or a faraway clock ticking. This makes it hard to concentrate.

Noises can seem louder and be uncomfortable, such as tannoys, alarms, volume in training videos or where microphones are being used.

What can help?

- Guidance on how to reduce noise levels in open-plan work areas.
- Keep doors and windows shut to reduce external noise.
- Have soft-closing doors to prevent distractions from slamming doors.
- Noise reduction panelling on ceilings or walls and screening. These can also help with lighting levels.
- Have the workstation away from noisy areas.
- Allow the use of headphones.

Odours.

Many neurodiverse people have a heightened sense of smell and find the smells of slightly aromatic foods overwhelming, never mind strong-smelling ones or perfumes.

What can help?

- Have guidance on what is acceptable in workplaces or certain areas. For example, hot food must be eaten in the kitchen or cafeteria, not in open plan working areas.

Touch and texture.

This can be due to the materials or fit of clothing such as uniforms. The material used in some chairs can also be a trigger.

Some people find that different pressures of touch affect them differently. For example, light touch or activities such as getting their haircut is painful, but a firmer pressure is fine.

What can help?

- Have alternative materials or styles for work uniforms.
- Some people may want to wear gloves when touching certain textures.

Visual stress.

This is also common. It can be triggered by paper colour, IT and tv screens, patterned carpets, wall decoration, and high colour contrasts.

What can help?

- Avoid highly contrasting colours and patterns. If it is not possible to completely avoid this, have some areas which do so the person can avoid having to look at it.
- Ensure that all online documents are accessible so an individual can adjust fonts, colours and layouts to reduce visual stress.
- Have coloured paper (cream works for most people) available for printing.
- Allow people to use coloured overlays or prescription coloured lenses.

Some common adjustments to support employees.

The first step should always be to talk to the person who needs the adjustment. They may be able to tell you what sort of sensory sensitivities they have, and what will likely help.

Some of the more common adjustments for colleagues with sensitivity to sensory stimuli are:

- Quieter working areas.
- Flexible hours, such as working from home at busier times.
- Changed hours to avoid busier times of the day.
- Replacing fluorescent and bright lighting with alternatives, including flexible lighting.
- Setting rules to reduce crosstalk in meetings and noise levels in open plan offices.
- Hyposensitive colleagues may need you to put alternative communication methods in place. For example, if they struggle to distinguish speech, there may be some digital solutions, such as speech-to-text software.

Key points,

- There are no one-size-fits-all solutions – just because someone has a neurodiverse condition, it doesn’t mean that they will need the same adjustments as someone else with the same condition.
- Adjustments shouldn’t be prescriptive – don’t impose adjustments unilaterally. Ask the individual what they need and – where reasonable – provide them with that.
- Use experts – with the above point said, sometimes you will need help from an expert to work out precisely what sort of adjustments are required. Not all neurodivergent people know exactly what adjustments they need, and the adjustment process can be an opportunity for you to help them work it out.
- If changing the work environment, you should always consult with your neurodiverse employees.
- Review regularly – once an adjustment is in place, set a regular review period to check with the individual that the adjustment is working, and if any further adjustments are needed.