

As we discuss sensory and/or over stimulation that Aspies experience, the article below can help us understand the reason(s) why our ND spouse/partner may not be attending social activities or church with us.

Four Faces of Overstimulation

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“The word “overstimulation” is not listed in standard collegiate dictionaries. In the lives of people with Asperger Syndrome, however, this little-recognized form of stress reigns supreme. The ideas in this article are drawn from my own experiences – both living with Asperger’s and interacting with dozens of other Aspies over the past six years.

Overstimulation (OS) occurs when there is “too much” of some external stimulus or stimuli for a person’s brain to process and integrate effectively. This leads to an unpleasant sensation of being flooded and an impulse to escape the stimulus – or, failing that, to cry or scream or thrash about. Overstimulation is a form of pain.

No one knows exactly why Aspies are so often overstimulated by experiences neurotypical individuals find quite manageable. It may involve some combination of over-responsiveness and inefficiency at the brain level. The psychological consequence of this neurological vulnerability is near-constant stress. A person prone to OS moves through life in a continuous state of hyper arousal, waiting for the next unpredictable event to overpower him.

Most people are familiar with sensory OS, but there are other kinds: I have identified three more. Together, they make up what I refer to as the four faces of overstimulation.

Sensory Overstimulation

Sensory OS is triggered by hypersensitive senses. It is impossible for the body to relax when it is subjected, or might at any moment be subjected, to a sensory assault. Just as a neurotypical individual would be fairly on edge in a world of erratic up-close explosive sounds, putrid smoky air, and sand-papery underwear, so Aspies (and others with sensory integration dysfunction) are continually on edge in this world.

My most sensitive sense is sound. Stepping outside, I clench my teeth as I take in the sounds of: moving cars, trucks, buses, trains, motorcycles, and airplanes; vehicles revving their motors and honking their horns; sirens from police cars, ambulances and fire trucks; construction workers’ machinery; music stores, outdoor radios, and blaring car radios; and the mechanical voices of trolleys and traffic lights. These combine with insults to my other senses – bright sunlight, cigarette smoke, impenetrable crowds. The sensory onslaught of everyday city life can make it a torment to leave my apartment.

Emotional Overstimulation

Aspies frequently find it difficult to identify what we are feeling. This may be related to the finding that the brain of an individual with an autism spectrum disorder exhibits decreased long-range connectivity, in particular between the limbic system (where emotions originate) and the prefrontal cortex (where they become conscious) (Geschwind, D.H., and Levitt). I often sense a thick fog in my head when asked to verbalize my emotions.

It seems almost paradoxical, then, that so many Aspie’s experience and absorb emotions with awesome force and rapidity. Tidal waves of feeling crash unexpectedly – and often unidentified – against flimsy barriers. Angry outbursts or crying fits may erupt when an Aspies emotional

reservoir overflows. Perhaps in part because Aspies cannot easily access our emotions, we cannot easily regulate them.

Emotional OS may be sparked by any number of everyday occurrences: a scary movie, a sad book, an intense psychotherapy session, a troubling lecture, a thorny conversation. Even joy – especially unanticipated joy, as in pleasant surprises – can be overwhelming in its intensity. All this makes Aspies quite averse to emotion. It is no coincidence that many Aspies would rather study and discuss neutral factual information than emotionally-drenched interpersonal matters.

Intellectual Overstimulation

The Aspie mind is always in motion. Such frenetically active minds can amass spectacular quantities of factual information and develop ingenious analytical powers. But they can also sink themselves in irrelevant details.

Many Aspies' intellectual lives are dominated by an inability to focus on what matters – a product of our infamous weak central coherence. Poor executive functioning only confounds the problem. Aspies struggle with prioritizing and organizing in every realm – taking notes at school, structuring projects at work, sorting papers at home. The average neurotypical would not memorize textbook page numbers when studying for an exam. But Aspies must filter and classify masses of information with a flawed sieve and faulty grid – a perpetually exhausting and overstimulating task.

I would speculate that many Aspies' intense interest in one or two topics, and the narrowness of focus for which we are both renowned and notorious, may be unconscious efforts to regulate intellectual OS by engaging deeply with material that need not be prioritized or structured very much. I certainly find evolutionary genetics refreshingly straightforward – and not at all overstimulating!

Social Overstimulation

Social OS is actually a composite of intellectual, emotional, and sensory OS. Social interactions are rife with rapid exchanges of verbal (intellectual) information, ever-shifting nonverbal (emotional) messages, and the sensory experiences of close-up bodies, loud voices, and the occasional mandatory hug.

The multimodal nature of social intercourse makes it supremely challenging for Aspies. There is so much to process at once – and it all moves so quickly! Interactions that flow intuitively for most neurotypicals can leave Aspies feeling breathless and stunned. Little wonder we sometimes say the wrong thing. Often what I most need to say is, “Slow down! Wait for me!”

Managing Overstimulation

There is currently no reliable medical treatment for OS. Nonetheless, some Aspies may be pleasantly surprised to discover how much calmer they could be by leading deliberately low-stimulation lives.

Simplify – To simplify, à la Thoreau, means to strip life down to its absolute pleasures – and absolute necessities. Aspies, who are highly stimulated by almost everything, will never enjoy low stress unless we learn to avoid the avoidable.

There is usually no good reason for an Aspie to go to an amusement park, attend a wild party, watch a horror movie, or take on an extra-heavy course load if these activities cause OS.

Aspies need not compare ourselves to neurotypicals in these areas. Neurotypicals seek out more stimulation because their baseline arousal is lower.

To reduce the overstimulating activity of staying organized (or dealing with clutter!), I keep my apartment empty of all but the essentials. My home is a “low stimulation zone.” I also try to simplify my life by maintaining a regular (yet modest) weekly schedule for social obligations, fun, self care, and home care.

Plan Everything – Aspies get overwhelmed by surprises and spontaneity. One powerful antidote to OS, then, is to plan ahead whenever possible.

Planning ahead means scheduling appointments and engagements well in advance and balancing our calendars so there is never too much stimulation in a given day – or week. It means tracking our activities as well as our moods and knowing when we need to cancel, to throw in the towel and rest.

Planning ahead also means that when Aspies cannot, or choose not to, avoid something sure to be overstimulating, we set aside time before and after the event to “destimulate.” Adequate down time is essential surrounding any stressful event – whether it is unpleasant but necessary (a root canal) or highly pleasurable (a successful date).

Be Proactive – When we do purposely engage in highly stimulating activities, Aspies can often reduce OS by respectfully asking for what we need.

In a society becoming increasingly sensitive to the needs of Aspies, a polite proactive Aspie can wield a good deal of power. We can ask others to speak more quietly, turn down the music, not touch us, or give us more space (reduce sensory OS). We can ask for ideas to be repeated or clarified, instructions written down, or tasks broken into steps (reduce intellectual OS). We can ask to change the subject of a depressing conversation (reduce emotional OS) or politely excuse ourselves for a few minutes at a social gathering (reduce social OS).

Where sensory OS is involved, Aspies can also use physical measures to protect the senses – sun glasses, ear plugs or headphones, soft dress clothes for a party. A concise explanation will soon orient anyone who might be perplexed by an Aspie’s use of these items.

Stay Healthy – Caring for our bodies by eating well, exercising, and getting sufficient rest and sleep also keeps our brains fit. Poor overall health or even just missing a meal reduces our thresholds for stimulation.

I have found that my body and mind are far less readily flooded after rigorous exercise. Indeed, if I did not exercise regularly, I feel I would drown in the treacherous waters of my own mind.

Be Patient – The novelty of the world is part of what makes life overstimulating for young Aspies. Our tolerance for stimulation generally increases as we grow older. Aspies graduate from surviving to thriving as we adjust to life’s surprises – and discover new ways to turn down the volume of the world.”

Nomi Kaim was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome at age 20 and currently volunteers at the Asperger’s Association of New England (AANE) in Watertown, MA, where she is a member.