Sensory Environment Assessment Checklist

A practical tool for identifying sensory strain and reducing hidden overload

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Important note

This resource is intended to support understanding and good practice in neuro-inclusive workplace design. It provides general guidance and does not constitute legal, medical, or clinical advice. Organisations should apply the principles in line with their own policies, regulatory obligations, and professional judgement.

Sensory environments shape behaviour long before motivation, attitude, or skill come into play.

When spaces are overwhelming, unpredictable, or poorly designed, people are forced to spend energy **self-regulating** just to stay present. Over time, this leads to fatigue, withdrawal, emotional escalation, or burnout… especially for neurodivergent people.

This checklist helps you identify **sensory friction points** that often go unnoticed… and highlights where small changes can make a disproportionate difference.

How to use this checklist

This is not about perfection.

Use it to:

- walk through a space (physical or digital)
- notice cumulative sensory load
- identify quick wins and structural issues
- prioritise changes that reduce harm

You do not need to experience all issues for them to matter.
One or two persistent stressors can be enough to drain capacity.

Core principle

People don't fail to cope… environments demand too much.

Sensory overwhelm is not a preference issue.
It is a **regulation issue**.

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1. Sound & Noise

Often the biggest driver of hidden exhaustion

Check for:

- Background noise (HVAC, buzzing, hums, traffic)
- Overlapping conversations in shared spaces
- Sudden or unpredictable sounds
- Poor acoustics or echo

- Constant alerts, alarms, or notifications

Ask:

- Can people escape noise when needed?
- Are quiet spaces genuinely quiet?
- Is noise exposure optional or unavoidable?

Common red flags:

- Open-plan spaces with no acoustic mitigation
- "You'll get used to it" attitudes
- Quiet rooms repurposed or monitored

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2. Lighting

Visual strain accumulates quickly

Check for:

- Harsh or flickering fluorescent lighting
- Bright overhead lights without alternatives
- Glare from screens or windows
- Inconsistent lighting between spaces
- Lack of control over brightness

Ask:

- Can individuals adjust lighting locally?
- Are softer or indirect lighting options available?
- Are transitions between lighting environments abrupt?

Common red flags:

- "All lights on" as default
- No task lighting or lamps
- Ignoring complaints of headaches or fatigue

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3. Visual Load & Clutter

The brain processes everything in view

Check for:

- Busy noticeboards or wall displays
- Excessive signage or posters
- Visual clutter in digital platforms
- Multiple screens or moving visuals
- Poor visual hierarchy

Ask:

- Is information prioritised clearly?
- Is essential information easy to find?
- Can visual input be reduced when needed?

Common red flags:

- Everything labelled "important"
- Dense digital dashboards
- Constant screen-sharing without structure

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4. Space, Movement & Crowding

Proximity affects regulation

Check for:

- Crowded walkways or work areas
- Hot-desking without choice
- Limited personal space
- Bottlenecks at entry points
- Restricted movement options

Ask:

- Can people choose where they sit or work?
- Is movement allowed without scrutiny?
- Are quieter, lower-traffic routes available?

Common red flags:

- Mandatory hot-desking
- Monitoring of movement or breaks
- No refuge from high-traffic areas

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5. Temperature, Air & Smell

Often underestimated, highly dysregulating

Check for:

- Temperature extremes or fluctuations
- Poor ventilation or stale air
- Strong smells (cleaning products, perfume, food)
- Limited access to fresh air
- Inflexible heating or cooling controls

Ask:

- Can temperature be adjusted locally?
- Are scent-free options considered?
- Is discomfort dismissed as minor?

Common red flags:

- "Everyone else is fine"
- No response to repeated complaints
- Overuse of fragranced products

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6. Touch & Physical Comfort

Small discomforts add up

Check for:

- Uncomfortable seating
- Restrictive clothing or uniform requirements
- Shared equipment without personalisation
- Hard surfaces or poor ergonomics
- Unexpected physical contact

Ask:

- Are people allowed to adjust their setup?
- Is movement encouraged to reset the body?
- Are sensory needs treated as legitimate?

Common red flags:

- One-size-fits-all furniture
- Policing posture or movement
- No ergonomic review process

7. Predictability & Transitions

Uncertainty increases sensory load

Check for:

- Sudden changes to rooms, schedules, or formats
- Last-minute room swaps
- Poor signage or unclear navigation
- Inconsistent routines
- Unexpected interruptions

Ask:

- Are changes communicated in advance?
- Are transitions clearly signposted?
- Is there time to adjust between activities?

Common red flags:

- "We're flexible… just adapt"
- No transition time built in
- Surprise changes treated as normal

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8. Digital Sensory Load (Hybrid & Remote)

Overload doesn't stop online

Check for:

- Back-to-back video calls
- Camera-on expectations
- Multiple communication channels
- Visual clutter in shared documents
- Constant notifications

Ask:

- Are camera-off options normalised?
- Is information centralised and structured?
- Are breaks built into digital schedules?

Common red flags:

- Equating visibility with engagement
- No guidance on digital boundaries

- Always-on communication culture

Patterns to pay attention to

Sensory risk increases when:

- multiple stressors are present at once
- people cannot opt out or adjust
- complaints are minimised or individualised
- recovery spaces are removed or repurposed
- coping is praised instead of prevention

If people seem irritable, withdrawn, inconsistent, or exhausted, sensory load is often part of the picture.

What good sensory environments do

Well-designed environments:

- reduce emotional escalation
- improve focus and stamina
- decrease conflict and absence
- reduce reliance on masking
- support regulation without effort

They do not rely on resilience.

They **remove unnecessary strain**.

A final note

You do not need to create perfect environments.

You need to create **adjustable ones**.

Choice, predictability, and flexibility are the foundations of sensory safety.

When environments are kinder to the nervous system, people do not become less capable…
they become **more available**.