



ALTOGETHER  
AUTISM  
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# Sensory Experiences Ngā Tairongo

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## Understanding Sensory Experiences

Have you ever been to a lecture in the centre of a busy train station?

Imagine trying to focus on a presentation while crowds of peak-time commuters stream past you in both directions. You try to make notes, but the pungent bouquet of people's perfumes, colognes and other bodily odours make your nose sting and your eyes water. The reflection of the sun off a metal surface further blurs your vision. Someone noisily slurps a coffee – which reminds you that you missed breakfast, which makes your stomach rumble loudly, making you feel self-conscious of your own body and its reactions to everything going on around you. You suddenly realise you are not taking in anything that the lecturer is saying, which in turn kickstarts your anxiety and makes your mind and heart race. You love this course, but the physical environment is so overwhelming, all you want to do is run far away!

This is how an autistic student may experience a shared learning space in your tertiary institution.

Autism impacts a person's senses - their sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, balance (vestibular) and body awareness (proprioception and interoception) (Altogether Autism, n.d.). In short, it impacts the way they interact with the world around them. Hyposensitivity or hypersensitivity to stimuli impacts an autistic person's ability to concentrate on everyday tasks.

## Survey Findings

Almost 60% of learners surveyed by Altogether Autism described sensory issues as 'very challenging' in tertiary education, with one survey participant describing lectures as "a bombardment of buzzing lights and air-con, clicking pens and seats being kicked."

Sensory experiences like this can cause anxiety and make it hard for an autistic person to process all the information they are receiving. This can cause stress and anxiety and lead to withdrawal, shut down and/or meltdown, which can be both physically and emotionally exhausting for them.

*"Under this kind of stress, my sensory issues are heightened, and I hear every little sound. I see everything and nothing on the paper at the same time and get a headache from the fluorescent lights."*

(Autistic tertiary student)

Surprisingly, sensory accommodations were ranked well down the list of types of assistance requested by autistic learners in our survey - listed below requests for assistance with mental health, executive functioning, and communication issues. Almost 50% of survey participants had never asked for support with sensory issues.

### Survey respondents listed a variety of reasons for not seeking support:

- Not wanting to disclose their diagnosis. One student commented: *"I do not seek support as much as I could because I am trying to fit in."*
- Not knowing that support was available.
- Not realising they could ask for help until it was too late.
- Disliking 'confrontation' with staff.

In terms of specific sensory supports, 58% of learners surveyed said that a more flexible learning environment is needed. 37% percent of learners surveyed identified breakout spaces as a sensory support that is needed in their tertiary institution.

In addition, 31% of whānau members who took part in the survey wanted to see an increase in knowledge around sensory issues for autistic learners.

## Creating Sensory-Friendly Spaces on Campus

Sensory-friendly spaces on campus are a great way to acknowledge an autistic student's need for regular breaks from the physical and social demands of school life.

Sensory-friendly breakout spaces can have a dual purpose: they are a place for neurodivergent learners and staff to connect and socialise, and also serve as a place of calm for those learners who need physical rest after social interaction or after being in a high sensory environment. These spaces can be a place of respite, where there are no social, sensory or time demands on the student.

*"I mostly need space on campus where I can be myself and be alone. When I need space, I usually spend some time in the bathroom, which isn't ideal, if there was a space for me to recover from social interactions that would help me the most."* (Autistic tertiary student)

### Features of a breakout space may include the following:

- Natural or adjustable lighting levels.
- Acoustic panels for sound absorption/low noise level.
- Comfortable, moveable, and mouldable seating, e.g., bean bags, yoga mats.

- Sensory aides available, e.g., weighted blankets, fidget toys etc.
- A clear and logical layout with defined areas suitable for quiet time, socialising and eating.

Furthermore, a map identifying high and low sensory ‘zones’ around the wider campus can also be helpful for learners looking to self-regulate their sensory input while navigating campus life.

Survey respondents found both benefits and disadvantages in having breakout spaces available on campus. Some appreciated having a place where they could connect with other autistic learners, while others found socialising with other users “incredibly awkward if you aren’t with an extrovert.”

Co-designing on-campus sensory friendly spaces can be a collaboration between autistic learners, whānau, on-campus disability services and external disability organisations. This is a positive strategy which acknowledges the importance of including and amplifying the voices of autistic learners.

There are opportunities for both proactively and retroactively designing sensory friendly spaces by assessing accessible features of existing buildings and incorporating sensory accessibility as part of the planning process for new builds. This will create a welcoming and inclusive space for all learners with additional needs.

Similarly, understanding and adopting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles is not so much about addressing the needs of a few, it is about creating an accessible and inclusive educational environment for all. Creating physical and sensory environments where everyone has what they need is a great way to show that a tertiary institution values all of their learners.

## You Can Support Your Learners by:

- **Encouraging and normalising the use of sensory aides, such as noise cancelling headphones, fidget toys, Irlen lens glasses, assistance dogs etc., in your class.** These can lessen an autistic student’s anxiety and improve their ability to concentrate on their work.
- **Reviewing your physical classroom environment.** What can you do to create a predictable, sensory friendly and welcoming learning environment for your autistic learners?
- **Recognising that autistic learners many need extra preparation and recovery time due to their sensory needs.** Many survey respondents commented on how hard it is working in a large (or small) study group, describing the social and sensory demands as physically and emotionally exhausting: “Every aspect of large-group learning is too overwhelming and people do not seem to understand how much that impacts my ability to “show” my skills. I hate it so much that I lost so many marks on assignments just because I couldn’t focus in the environment I was in. In addition to this being extremely exhausting for me so I knew that every time I had a laboratory class, I couldn’t plan on doing anything else for that day.” It is important that extra time for autistic learners to prepare beforehand and rest after study group interactions is factored into their day
- **Ensuring learners with sensory needs can access accommodations for exams.** “Sometimes a person clicking a pen continuously or a calculator making a noise or too bright lighting can really have an impact on our exam outcomes. People don’t understand that it’s more than annoying, it’s overwhelming.” As this student explains in our survey, exams create a particularly challenging sensory experience. Imagine trying to sit an exam in the middle of a busy train station! Ensure that you engage with autistic learners in the lead up to exams, to see if there are any accommodations, they need to alleviate any anxiety around this already stressful experience.

## Final Words

A welcoming and supportive tertiary institution culture requires little financial, but significant attitudinal investment to improve the experiences of autistic learners. Designated areas for sensory regulation are invaluable resources for autistic learners, but so too is staff being flexible and open-minded when sensory accommodations are requested. Understanding and respecting the broad spectrum of strengths and challenges an autistic student experiences in daily life can go a very long way.

### References

Altogether Autism. (n.d.). Sensory sensitivities in people with autism.

[Sensory sensitivities in people with autism – Altogether Autism](#)

### Further Information

[Teaching autistic learners who demonstrate ‘challenging behaviours’ at school or pre-school – Altogether Autism](#)

[Wayback Machine \(archive.org\)](#)

[Resources – Mindful Body Awareness](#)

## Meet Rebekah Corlett, MNZM



Rebekah Corlett, MNZM is a member of the Altogether Autism Consumer Advisory Group. She has an autistic daughter, Sophia, 13, who has limited verbal communication and uses an Alternative Augmentative Communication (ACC) device to communicate.