

Sensory Accommodations Walk-Through

A practical walk-through for DSD staff on understanding and implementing sensory accommodations in meetings, training spaces, and service environments. This resource covers fluorescent lighting, scent-free environments, quiet spaces, sensory needs in meetings and direct services, and how to plan for sensory diversity in DSD programming. It draws on disability rights principles, neurodiversity frameworks, and human-centered service design.

Content

Sensory Accommodations Walk-Through

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Standards reference: Title II ADA; §504 Rehabilitation Act; Minnesota Human Rights Act (MHRA); DSD Equity and Inclusion principles

What this is

A practical walk-through for DSD staff on understanding and implementing sensory accommodations in meetings, training spaces, and service environments. This resource covers fluorescent lighting, scent-free environments, quiet spaces, sensory needs in meetings and direct services, and how to plan for sensory diversity in DSD programming. It draws on disability rights principles, neurodiversity frameworks, and human-centered service design.

Why this matters for DSD

Sensory sensitivities are not rare. They are a common part of many disability experiences and a significant aspect of neurodivergent experience. People who have autism spectrum conditions, sensory processing differences, traumatic brain injuries, migraines, PTSD, chronic pain conditions, fibromyalgia, anxiety disorders, and many other conditions may have heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli — light, sound, scent, temperature, and texture.

When DSD's service environments, meetings, and events do not account for sensory needs:

- People with sensory sensitivities may be unable to participate at all
- Participation may be so painful or overwhelming that it causes harm — a person may leave early, become dysregulated, or experience a health crisis
- The quality of communication and decision-making degrades — people in sensory distress cannot focus, process information, or communicate effectively

This is an equity issue. When DSD designs environments that are accessible only to people without sensory sensitivities, it excludes a segment of both its staff and the people it serves.

The good news: many sensory accommodations are simple, low-cost, and benefit everyone — not just people with sensory disabilities.

The core principles

Universal design first: Designing environments with sensory inclusion from the start is better than retrofitting accommodations. Scent-free, moderate-lighting, low-noise environments are not hardships for neurotypical people — they are simply better environments.

Individual variation: Sensory needs are highly individual. What causes distress for one person may be imperceptible to another. Never assume you know a person's sensory needs — ask, and believe them.

Proactive, not reactive: Do not wait for a person to reach distress before addressing sensory barriers. Include sensory considerations in your planning from the start.

Respect autonomy: Accommodations are offered and provided when requested; they are never imposed. And people's stated needs are not questioned.

Fluorescent Lighting

Fluorescent lighting — especially older fluorescent fixtures — flickers at a rate that most people cannot consciously detect but that many people's nervous systems respond to. This can cause headaches, migraines, visual disturbances, and difficulty concentrating or reading, particularly for people with traumatic brain injuries, migraines, autism, sensory processing differences, and certain vision conditions.

What to know about fluorescent lighting

- Flicker: Older fluorescent lights flicker at 120 Hz in the U.S. Some people with neurological conditions or autism experience this as a stroboscopic effect, causing headaches, nausea, or visual disturbance
- Color temperature: Fluorescent light is often "cool" (bluish) — a color temperature that can be alerting and fatiguing for extended exposure
- Intensity: Fluorescent lights in offices and meeting rooms are often much brighter than needed and difficult to dim

Accommodations and responses

In your own meetings:

- Ask participants in advance whether lighting adjustments would be helpful
- If yes: turn off overhead fluorescent lights and use floor lamps, table lamps, or natural light supplemented with task lighting

- If the room is controlled by facilities: request dimmer-capable fixtures or explore alternatives

In facility bookings:

- Prefer rooms with windows and natural light
- Ask venues about lighting options before booking — "Can the overhead fluorescents be dimmed or turned off? Is there alternative lighting?"
- Note: newer LED lighting with high CRI (Color Rendering Index) and no perceptible flicker is a major improvement over older fluorescent; advocate for lighting upgrades in DSD spaces

For virtual meetings:

- Lighting matters for video too — bright fluorescent overhead lights can cause eye strain for participants watching screens; suggest participants with sensory sensitivities attend virtually if in-person light is a barrier

In direct service settings:

- If a client or family member expresses sensitivity to lighting during a home visit or service meeting: adapt by positioning differently relative to light sources, turning off a lamp, or closing blinds on bright windows
- Do not dismiss lighting sensitivity as minor

The "sunglasses inside" situation

Some people with sensory sensitivities, migraine conditions, traumatic brain injuries, or light sensitivity conditions may wear tinted glasses or sunglasses in indoor settings. This is a reasonable accommodation and should not be commented on, questioned, or asked to remove.

Scent-Free Environments

Fragrance sensitivity is common among people with allergies, asthma, multiple chemical sensitivities, migraines, traumatic brain injuries, and certain other conditions. Exposure to strong scents can trigger headaches, respiratory difficulty, migraine attacks, nausea, and in some cases anaphylaxis.

Sources of scent in work environments

- Perfume, cologne, aftershave
- Scented lotions, hair products, and deodorants
- Scented cleaning products
- Air fresheners, plug-in scents, candles, reed diffusers
- Fresh flowers (pollen-heavy varieties)
- Scented markers, whiteboard cleaners

DSD scent-free meeting practice

For any meeting where a participant has indicated scent sensitivity (or as a standing practice for accessible meetings):

Include in the meeting invitation:

"To support participants with sensory sensitivities, this meeting is a scent-free environment. Please refrain from wearing perfume, cologne, or strongly scented products. Thank you."

Set up the meeting space:

- Remove air fresheners, plug-in scents, and candles from the room
- Use scent-free cleaning products to prepare the space
- Request that facilities avoid scented cleaning products in meeting rooms where sensory needs have been noted
- Remove fresh flowers or highly fragrant plants

If an accommodation request is received:

- Confirm scent-free practices will be in place
- Ask if there are other environmental needs (lighting, temperature, noise)

Note: Scent-free is not a guarantee — some scented personal care products are not visible or detectable until someone is in proximity. The best practice is proactive communication in invitations, repeated as a reminder before the meeting.

Why this is not about personal choice

Some staff may see scent-free requests as an imposition. The relevant frame is: a staff member who cannot attend because scent caused a migraine attack is excluded from DSD's programming by something that is easy to modify. This is an equity issue, not a comfort preference.

Quiet Spaces

Noise sensitivity is a common experience for people with autism, sensory processing differences, PTSD, TBIs, migraines, hearing aids (which amplify background noise along with speech), and anxiety disorders. Background noise in offices, open-plan workspaces, and busy meeting venues can create barriers to participation and communication.

Types of problematic noise

- HVAC noise and air circulation systems (steady hum; some people find this helpful, others find it aversive)
- Open-plan office chatter and keyboard/phone sounds
- Building maintenance — vacuuming, leaf blowers, construction
- Multiple simultaneous conversations in large group settings
- Echoing and reverberation in large meeting rooms or atria
- Loud ventilation or fan noise from projectors and A/V equipment

Providing quiet spaces

In large events and trainings:

Designate a quiet space — a separate room or clearly marked section — where participants can step away from the main event without social pressure. The quiet space should:

- Be clearly marked ("Quiet Space — sensory break area")
- Have low lighting or adjustable lighting
- Have comfortable seating
- Have no loud HVAC or fan noise
- Be free of scent

In meetings:

- Inform participants at the start where they can step out if they need a sensory break
- Normalize breaks — "We'll take a 10-minute break at the halfway point; feel free to step out if you need a moment"
- For virtual meetings: normalize having the camera off, using chat for participation, and stepping away for breaks

For staff with ongoing sensory needs:

- Acoustic accommodations (quiet rooms, private offices, noise-canceling headphones provided by DSD) may be part of a reasonable accommodation plan for staff
- Work with the DSD Equity Team and HR on accommodating staff with sensory processing differences

Noise management in meetings

- Close doors to the meeting room during the session
- Mute or adjust the HVAC if it is intrusive and the meeting space allows
- Ask participants to mute themselves when not speaking (virtual meetings)
- Use a microphone and speaker system for voices rather than raising voices to fill a noisy room
- For hybrid meetings: ensure the virtual participants' audio is of good quality so they do not have to work hard to hear

Temperature and Physical Comfort

Temperature sensitivity is common among people with multiple sclerosis, lupus, fibromyalgia, autonomic conditions, certain medications, and many other conditions. Some people have difficulty regulating body temperature.

Meeting temperature practices

- Aim for a temperature of 68–72°F (20–22°C) — a common comfort range
- Know where and how to adjust the thermostat or contact facilities before the meeting
- Alert participants if you cannot control the temperature ("Note: The meeting room is warm today; feel free to wear layers")
- For people in wheelchairs or with limited mobility: note that reduced activity can make a room feel colder;

seating near drafts (A/C vents, exterior walls) may be a barrier

Sensory Needs in Direct Service Meetings

When conducting individual service planning meetings with clients, sensory needs are part of person-centered practice.

Questions to incorporate into planning conversations

- "Are there any environmental needs I should know about for our meeting? For example, some people find certain lighting or noise levels difficult — is there anything we should plan for?"
- "Is there a setting that works better for you — your home, our office, a community location, or a phone or video call?"
- "How long is a comfortable meeting length for you? We can always take breaks or schedule two shorter meetings."

Flexibility in modality

When in-person meetings create sensory barriers that cannot be resolved:

- Offer telephone or video meeting as an alternative
- Offer to conduct business by mail, email, or accessible electronic forms
- Document that the accommodation was offered and accepted/declined

Planning time

Some people with sensory sensitivities also have difficulty with unexpected changes, transitions, or rushing. Building buffer time into appointments, providing a clear agenda in advance, and arriving at the agreed time are all sensory-inclusive practices.

Sensory Accommodations Quick Reference

Need — Common causes — DSD response

Fluorescent lighting sensitivity — TBI, autism, migraine, sensory processing, photosensitivity — Turn off overhead lights; use lamps or natural light; book rooms with adjustable lighting

Scent sensitivity — Allergy, asthma, MCS, migraine, TBI, autism — Scent-free meeting notice; remove air fresheners; use scent-free products

Noise sensitivity — Autism, PTSD, TBI, hearing aids, anxiety, migraine — Close doors; quiet space available; breaks normalized; virtual option offered

Temperature sensitivity — MS, lupus, fibromyalgia, medications, autonomic conditions — Know how to adjust room temperature; allow layers; alert if uncontrollable

Fluorescent light (visual) — Low vision, photosensitive epilepsy — No rapid flicker; adjustable lighting; no strobe effects in presentations

Sensory overload in crowds — Autism, PTSD, anxiety, sensory processing — Quiet space designated;

breaks normalized; virtual option offered

Bright screen sensitivity — Migraine, TBI, computer vision syndrome — Reduce screen brightness; dark mode option; avoid white backgrounds in presentations

Common Errors and How to Fix Them

Error — Impact — Fix

Scented air fresheners in meeting rooms — Triggers migraines, respiratory distress — Remove all scented products from meeting rooms as standard practice

No mention of sensory accommodations in invitations — People with sensory needs don't know to ask — Add scent-free and accommodation language to all invitation templates

No quiet space at large events — People with sensory needs cannot attend all-day events — Designate a quiet room; communicate its location in event materials

Questioning or minimizing sensory needs — Discourages disclosure; creates exclusion — Believe people; accommodate without requiring justification

No break in meetings over 60 minutes — People with sensory or fatigue needs cannot sustain participation — Schedule breaks every 60 minutes

Bright fluorescent lights with no alternative — People with light sensitivity cannot attend comfortably — Have a lamp alternative; book rooms with dimmable or adjustable lighting

Wearing strong perfume or cologne to a meeting — Triggers migraine, asthma, or distress in sensitized individuals — Participate in scent-free practices in all professional DSD settings

Where to Get Help

- Autism Society of Minnesota: <https://ausm.org/> — resources on sensory needs in service settings
- ASAN — Autistic Self Advocacy Network: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>
- Multiple Chemical Sensitivity information: <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/>
- Job Accommodation Network (JAN) — Sensory Disabilities: <https://askjan.org/>
- One DSD Equity Team: Sensory accommodation planning, consultation, and support

Connection to DSD's Six Program Goals

DSD Program Goal — Sensory Accommodations Connection

Equity and inclusion — Sensory barriers exclude people with disabilities just as physical barriers do; removing them is equity work

Cultural and linguistic competence — Sensory needs intersect with cultural norms around personal space, scent, and social environment — be aware and responsive

Olmstead implementation — People with sensory disabilities cannot participate in community meetings if environments are not accessible

Workforce development — Staff with sensory sensitivities need accessible workspaces and meeting environments

Quality improvement — Sensory-accessible environments improve focus, communication quality, and

participation for everyone

Leadership and accountability — Leaders create sensory-accessible cultures by modeling inclusive practices and responding to accommodation needs

Sources

- ADA.gov — ADA Requirements: Effective Communication: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/effective-communication/>
- Job Accommodation Network — Sensory Disabilities: <https://askjan.org/>
- Autism Society of Minnesota: <https://ausm.org/>
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>
- Minnesota Department of Human Rights — Disability Rights: <https://mn.gov/mdhr/>
- National Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Information: <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/>
- One DSD Program Charter v1.1, Accessibility Floor (Article 13)

Accessibility is everyone's responsibility. When in doubt, ask people with disabilities what works for them.

Respect autonomy: Accommodations are offered and provided when requested; they are never imposed. And people's stated needs are not questioned.

Ask participants in advance whether lighting adjustments would be helpful

Ask venues about lighting options before booking — "Can the overhead fluorescents be dimmed or turned off? Is there alternative lighting?"

Use scent-free cleaning products to prepare the space

Confirm scent-free practices will be in place

Ask if there are other environmental needs (lighting, temperature, noise)

Ask participants to mute themselves when not speaking (virtual meetings)

For consultant operations, use Sensory Accommodations Walk-Through to prepare the agenda, participation methods, access supports, decision points, and follow-up; adapt the guidance to the request, test assumptions, document advice, and route authority questions. Start by respect autonomy: Accommodations are offered and provided when requested; they are never imposed. And people's stated needs are not questioned.

Do not replace official legal, policy, clinical, supervisory, program, or Tribal authority.

Do not infer an individual's identity, preferences, needs, or experience from group-level information.

State uncertainty, use current authoritative sources, and escalate when the decision exceeds the user's role.

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human-centered service design. Step 1. Respect autonomy: Accommodations are offered and provided when requested; they are never imposed. And people's stated needs are not questioned. Step 2. Ask participants in advance whether lighting adjustments would be helpful Step 3. Ask venues about lighting options before booking — "Can the overhead fluorescents be dimmed or turned off? Is there alternative lighting?" Step 4. Use scent-free cleaning products to prepare the space Step 5. Confirm scent-free practices will be in place Step 6. Ask if there are other environmental needs (lighting, temperature, noise) Step 7. Ask participants to mute themselves when not speaking (virtual meetings)