

Sensory Overload & Worship

Worship is a very important part of church. So how do you know if it's accessible to everyone?

Learn more about sensory overload and how to help.

What is Sensory Overload?

- Sensory Overload is when your brain cannot process the amount of input that is coming from your senses. This can be from a combination of senses or even just one that feels really intense.
- This causes the brain to feel overstimulated and often results in the fight, flight, or freeze response.
- Sensory Overload can happen to anyone. It can also vary depending on how a person is feeling in the moment. The more stressed someone feels, the less sensory input they may be able to handle.
- It is more common in people with hidden disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, PTSD, General Anxiety Disorder and more. Up to 90% of people with ASD have sensory issues.

What is NOT Sensory Overload?

- A person just feeling annoyed by a style of music or style of environment is NOT sensory overload. Sensory Overload is not about a style preference at all.

Why does this matter in Worship?

- Worship is a vital part of the church community and individual spiritual growth for each member.
 - A person who is prone to sensory overload may not be able to participate in certain worship environments where super loud volume and bright streaming lights are present. If a church only offers worship environments like these, without any options or adaptations, then many people with hidden disabilities and their families will be unable to participate with the rest of the church body. This can make people feel like they don't belong and discourage them from going to church.
- **The Great Commission - Matt 28: 16-20** - asks us to reach everyone with the gospel. So, it matters that churches find a way to be more inclusive in all aspects of the church, including worship.

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How Worship Leaders Can Help

1. Talk to people who experience sensory overload. Ask them to describe their personal experience, or their loved one's experience. Ask what is hard and what is helpful for them during worship. Ask them if they would invite others who have sensory issues to your church as it is now. Invite them into brainstorming solutions.
2. Consider turning down the volume and making the lighting stationary.
3. Have a quieter area available for people to participate in worship. Perhaps even consider livestreaming it in another room and having a volunteer leader there to help include people in worship activities such as prayer, communion, etc.
4. Have ear plugs and noise-cancelling headphones available. Also, understand that this can be very helpful for some, but is not a solution for many.
5. If your church has multiple services, consider making one service PER WEEK more sensory-friendly by turning down the volume (or going acoustic) & dimming the lights without streaming or flashing.
6. Check your decibel level and make sure it's not in the danger zone.
7. Assess how sound absorbent your walls are. Would it be beneficial to add sound absorbing panels? If that is not an option, how can you compensate for the lack of sound absorption? Would turning down the volume, building a drum cage, or going to acoustics help?
8. Assess if the mixing of sound is an issue. Sometimes, when sound is not mixed well, it can result in sharp notes that are harder to process. Would doing more volunteer training with your sound techs help? What about your lighting team? Would training them about sensory overload help?
9. Look at your Sunday worship crowd and notice who is NOT there. If you do not have many people with hidden disabilities, such as autism, in the crowd. Why not?
10. Invite people who experience sensory overload or who have other disabilities into your Worship Team planning and training meetings. Together we can make the Great Commission possible.