

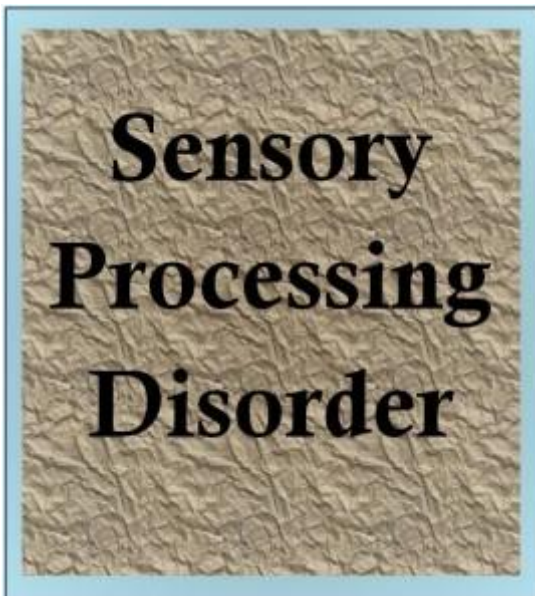
Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD)

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Sensory Processing Disorder: The Basics

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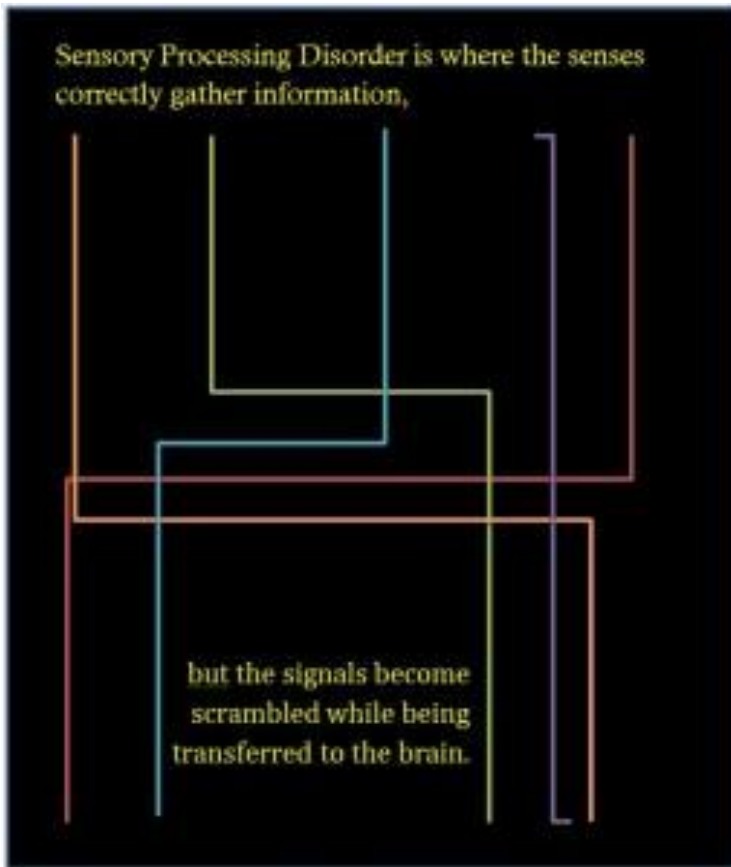


I'm generally a nonviolent person, but for some reason, loud sounds have always been a trigger, a trigger that turns this generally happy, on the short side, Disney Princess Wannabe into a lethal weapon. It's like the scene in Zoolander, where the song, "Relax" makes sweet, stupid model, Derik Zoolander, suddenly able to assassinate the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

An unexpected loud sound sends my system into panic overload. I feel violated. Adrenaline pumps through my body, and I'm ready to defend myself as if someone had actually attacked me. And it makes me angry, like, I-want-to-beat-the-crud-out-of-whoever-just-yelled-in-my-ear angry. (As a child, it was extremely hard to restrain myself from doing so.) As an adult, while I can control myself, it's extremely embarrassing when someone yells in my ear, or an unexpected loud sound takes me by surprise, and I have to keep myself from crying.

What is Sensory Processing Disorder?

While I've never been diagnosed with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), my jerk reaction to loud sounds makes me a lot more sympathetic to the plight of those who do. SPD is, "condition in which the brain has trouble receiving and responding to information that comes in through the senses," according to [WebMD](#). (Note, it was formerly called *Sensory Integration Dysfunction*.)



The [SPD Foundation](#) describes the basic concept of sensory function as the way our nervous system receives messages from our senses. The messages our eyes, ears, skin, noses, and tastebuds create are sent to the nervous system and turns them into appropriate "motor and behavioral responses."

SPD is what happens when those messages aren't correctly relayed to the brain. According to the SPD Foundation Pioneering occupational therapist and neuroscientist A. Jean Ayres, PhD, compares it to a traffic jam. The signals don't all get to their correct destinations at the correct times. [Autism Help](#) points out that SPD is not like being deaf or blind. The information is being received from the senses, so

unlike a blind person, the person with SPD is seeing the world. The disconnect comes while the correctly gathered information is being shuttled around the brain.

As with most other neurological disorders, scientists don't know exactly what causes SPD. From what I've read, genetics seem to be the leading cause. [Sensory Processing Disorder.com](#) says that when children are diagnosed, parents often start to research, and realize that they've also suffered from parts of the disorder their whole lives as well. It seems to me that many of the people over the years who have been considered "clutzy" or "overly sensitive" are just now getting a label.

Symptoms of Sensory Processing Disorder

SPD is a spectrum disorder, according to [WebMD](#), just like many other neurological disorders. This means it can be mild or severe, depending on the individual. Interestingly enough, it can also affect just one sense or multiple senses. So a child with SPD might struggle with the sense of touch alone, or he could also struggle with sight and sound, or even all of his senses. [Autism Help](#) also says that the sense of balance (vestibular system) and positional sense (proprioception) can also be affected.

Here are some of the common symptoms of SPD:

- A dislike of being touched
- Refusing to eat, certain foods, or food textures, to the point of having emotional meltdowns
- Insisting on eating only a few certain foods
- Being constantly off-balance, likely to trip or fall into things
- Constantly twirling, rocking, or swinging, being highly sensitive to sounds, smells, lighting levels, and physical stimulation
- Hatred of certain physical textures, such as sand, particular fabrics
- Being understimulated, constantly trying to create stimulation by tearing paper, breaking crayons, or creating other forms of stimuli
- Unusual posture
- Struggling with fine motor tasks, such as closing/opening buttons, using zippers, holding pencils, or using eating utensils

(This list is compiled from [SensoryProcessingDisorder.com](#), [The SPD Foundation](#), [WebMD](#), and my own personal experience with children in the classroom.)

It's important to remember that many young children lack grace and need help learning fine motor skills. The SPD Foundation says that studies have suggested as many as one in six children have symptoms of this disorder, but other studies have said differently, giving numbers like one out of every twenty children. When it's considered a disorder is when the symptoms are interrupting the individual's everyday life.

Diagnosis & Treatment

A pediatrician might not be the one to diagnose a child with SPD, but your pediatrician is your best bet to getting a referral to see the person for an evaluation – An Occupational or Physical Therapist. This disorder doesn't have a litmus test to immediately diagnose someone, such as a bloodtest or urine sample.

[WebMD](#) says these professionals evaluate children based on observations. They watch how children respond to stimuli, balance, stance, coordination, and eye movements. If you take your child in

for an evaluation, however, it's best to come prepared. You might want to have a list of symptoms or behaviors that your child typically exhibits. Data like this might help the therapist come to a conclusion more quickly.

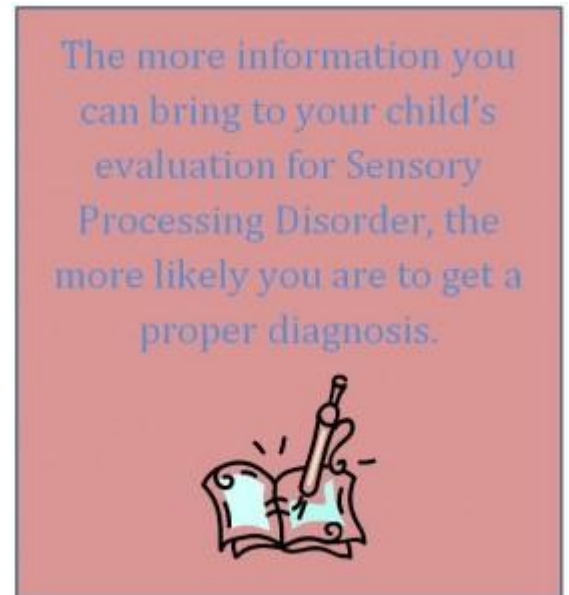
I personally think treatment to SPD is fascinating to watch. Unlike other disorders, where treatment involves drugs or highly technical medical equipment, treatment for SPD is generally based on Occupational Therapy or Physical Therapy, and the things the professionals practice with the children are often actions the parents and teachers can practice with the child in other places, such as home and at school.

I've gotten to sit in on a few occupational therapy sessions, and it felt great knowing that the type of exercises the therapist was giving to the child I was working with were exercises I could help the child with in other parts of life.

The [SPD Foundation](#) says that there's a particular OT approach for children with this disorder called the SI approach – Sensory Integration. Listening Therapy can also be combined. What's important to remember, the article says, is that these children aren't any less intelligent than they would have been because of the disorder; their brains simply work differently, and they need to be taught how to use their bodies according to how their brains are wired.

Sensory Processing Disorder – Comorbidity with other Neurological Disorders

SPD can be found by itself (although it's strangely not yet listed as an official disorder of its own), but it's often found in individuals with other disorders. According to the University of California San Francisco, the two



highest disorders SPD occurs with are Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), but I've seen it occur in others.

Children with Down Syndrome often display symptoms of the disorder as well, according to the National Down Syndrome Congress. From my personal experience, as well as my mother's (a 4th generation teacher of 16 years), it seems, however, that many children with other neurological disorders seem to have symptoms of SPD. Remember, it's a spectrum disorder, so that means that many people won't have every single symptom, but can still have the disorder.

So What Now?

While I've never been diagnosed with SPD, I'm very aware that my ears extremely sensitive. I remember crying as a child when noises were too noisy. The good news? There's one sound, a deafening roar, of all things, that doesn't create a sense of fight or flight in me.



I grew up near Nellis AFB, the home of the beautiful F-16 Thunderbirds. Because it's a training base, I grew up with jet engines screaming above my head daily. While I hated the sound initially as a child, my parents assured me that the sound of airplanes was good. It meant the airplanes were keeping us

safe. My parents worked hard to protect my sensitive ears, but as the years went by, I began to realize I didn't hate the roar quite as much as I used to. And today? I love it. It gives me a thrill!

My point? SPD is a very treatable disorder. Children with SPD can better learn to understand the connection between their minds and bodies. Like I now understand that I have sensitive ears, but my reaction to sound doesn't have to mean that whatever caused the sound is necessarily bad, children can learn to work with their bodies and reactions to stimuli as well.

The [SPD Foundation](#) has some great success stories from families and individuals who have faced the challenges of SPD. And because the treatment doesn't involve high doses of drugs or complicated equipment, these kiddos can continue their treatment and learning at home and at school. And any type of challenge that can be faced anywhere is one of my favorites!