A fact sheet about

Sleep that suits your senses

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Sleep that suits your senses

Why common sleep advice may not suit your senses, and what to change.



Key points

- Common sleep advice, like a dark and silent room, assumes everyone finds the same things calming. Your senses may need something different.
- Your sensory profile (definition below) is the mix of things your senses find too much, not enough or just right.
- In research, autistic adults who were more sensitive to sensory input had more trouble sleeping. ADHD adults often have sensory differences too, and if you are neurodivergent in another way, your senses may shape your sleep as well.
- What may help is changing one thing in your bedroom for the sense that bothers you most, and keeping the steps before bed the same each night.

What a sensory profile is

The advice says to sleep in a dark, silent room. But in the silence you can hear the fridge, a neighbour's TV and your own heartbeat. Or the sheet feels rough, and you cannot stop noticing the seam on your pillow.

That advice was written for an average sleeper. What may help more is a bedroom and a wind-down built around how your own senses work.

You take in the world through your senses: sound, light, touch, smell, taste, heat and cold, and the sense of where your body is. Your ‘sensory profile’ is how much each sense picks up, and how that feels to you.

Some people avoid input, and find small sounds or a tag in a shirt hard to bear. Other people seek it out, and feel calmer with pressure, sound or movement. Many people are both, depending on the sense and the day.

In surveys, autistic adults found daily sights, sounds and touch too much more often than other adults. ADHD adults also often found input too much or not enough, and sound most of all. Autistic adults say

that input is easier to bear when they can control it and know when it will come. They also say it is harder to bear when they are tired or stressed, which is often how you feel at bedtime.

Why senses and sleep are linked

To fall asleep, you need to be able to let go of what is around you. A sound you cannot shut out, or a texture you keep noticing, can keep pulling your attention back.

Autistic adults describe being very sensitive to sound as something that affects their sleep. In a large study of autistic adults, those who were more sensitive to sensory input had more trouble sleeping. The link was clearest for what they see.

Most of this research is with autistic adults, and there is less with ADHD adults and more broadly neurodivergent adults. If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise some of this too. More broadly, research on autism, ADHD and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: change one thing for your loudest sense

Think about which sense bothers you most at night. Change one thing for that sense this week, and leave the others for later. Some ideas to choose from:

- sound: earplugs, or a steady sound like a fan, rain or the same quiet podcast each night
- light: blackout curtains or an eye mask, or a dim lamp if full dark feels uneasy
- touch: bedding that feels right on your skin, clothes with no tags, or a heavy blanket if pressure calms you
- heat and cold: a cooler room, socks, or a fan on your skin
- smell: a scent you like, or no scent at all

What calms one person can keep another awake. Some people need silence and others sleep better with sound, so go with what your senses tell you.

Give each change about a week before you decide. You can keep a note in the Understanding Zoe app of what you changed and how you slept. Then look back on it after a few weeks.

This advice comes from what neurodivergent adults say helped them. It has not been tested in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it.

A wind-down you can predict

Knowing what comes next can make input easier to bear, and the end of the day is no different. A wind-down is a few steps you do in the same order before bed, so the evening holds no surprises. It can be short: soft clothes on, lights down, teeth, then something calm. Experts in adult ADHD note that a more regular day may help sleep too.

An interest can be part of it. In research, autistic adults describe time with an interest as a way to settle and recharge. Many neurodivergent people also say a show they have seen many times feels

calming, because they know what will happen. A familiar book or show may hold you less than something new. But an interest can also keep you up for hours, so choose one with a clear end, like one episode.

You can read more about coming out of deep focus here.

If the same steps get boring, keep the order and change what fills it, like a new podcast or a different scent.

If your mind is still busy when the lights go off, you can read more about a brain dump before bed here. If you are wide awake late at night whatever you do, you can read more about why your body clock may run late here.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, whether this happens every night or only now and then. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you set up a bedroom and an evening that suit your senses, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Tell your GP if you feel exhausted however long you sleep, or if someone notices you snore loudly or stop breathing in your sleep. Those need their own check.

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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