

# Worship Without Limits

Practical guidance for ministry leaders shepherding  
individuals with sensory sensitivity

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**Whether you are  
a pastor, worship  
leader, volunteer,  
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this guide aims  
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## **A SUCCESS STORY OF SENSORY SENSITIVITY & WORSHIP**

This resource guide is the culmination of an unexpected journey I began 10 years ago. My work usually focuses on supporting vulnerable children and their families. Normally, this means that I work with non-profit organizations and governments. However, 10 years ago, a family sought me out concerning their adopted son, Dylan (a pseudonym), who struggled during church worship due to sensory overload.

The loud music, bright lights, and crowded spaces overwhelmed him, leading to meltdowns during the service. Despite his parents' efforts to help him, Dylan's discomfort persisted, and attending church became increasingly distressing for the entire family. They began arriving late, leaving early, and felt isolated from their church community. They seriously considered resigning from church entirely. Recognizing the need for support, Dylan's parents approached the church's leadership team. They were receptive, yet uncertain about how best to assist Dylan and his family. This is when the family contacted me.

Working hand in hand with Dylan, his parents, and the church leadership, we devised a tailored plan to address Dylan's unique needs. Through implementing sensory-friendly adjustments, such as creating a designated quiet area for him and providing sensory aids like noise-canceling headphones and quiet fidget toys, we were able to mitigate sensory overload. We taught Dylan strategies, like deep breathing and recognizing when he needed a break from sensory stimuli. We enlisted the support of a teen from the congregation to serve as Dylan's buddy, allowing Dylan's family to participate in the service while ensuring Dylan had support when needed.

The impact was profound and transformative. The church was able to create an environment where Dylan felt valued and understood. He began to thrive. Dylan's family was embraced by a church community that not only understood their challenges, but also actively worked to accommodate them. For the first time in years, they felt seen. They belonged. The experience also deeply impacted the church leadership team. The church now provides a designated sensory space for anyone and provides ongoing training for volunteers to help them recognize and respond to the needs of individuals with sensory sensitivities.

However, Dylan's story is just one among countless individuals with sensory sensitivity facing similar challenges. It is this awareness that drives my passion for this project: To shed light on experiences like Dylan's and equip churches to better support individuals with sensory sensitivity. The tips and strategies in this guide are not just based on academic literature. They also come from the real experiences shared with us by over a thousand individuals with sensory sensitivities and their families, as well as insights from over 100 ministry leaders. This means the strategies presented here are not only backed by research but also reflect the challenges and successes of real people and dedicated ministry leaders prayerfully working to create inclusive worship environments. My hope is that through this resource guide, we can empower churches to create more welcoming worship environments where everyone, including those with sensory needs, can thrive and feel a sense of belonging.

# EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORSHIP

Whether we know it or not, nearly all worship communities will serve people with sensory sensitivities. This guide is designed to provide practical support and guidance for ministry leaders who wish to create inclusive and accommodating worship environments for everyone. The guide is the result of a comprehensive review of the academic literature and a survey conducted with over a thousand individuals with sensory sensitivities and their families, along with insights from over 100 ministry leaders. Whether you are a pastor, worship leader, volunteer, or are involved in any capacity within a worship community, this guide aims to equip you with valuable knowledge and simple, actionable strategies. Ultimately, this guide seeks to help you open the doors wider to your worship spaces by providing the tools to better support those with sensory sensitivities and their families.

# WHY DOES SENSORY SENSITIVITY MATTER IN OUR WORSHIP COMMUNITY?

*“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.”*

**1 Corinthians 12:12-27 ESV**

Just as the human body comprises many interconnected parts, each with its own unique function, so too does the body of Christ encompass believers from diverse backgrounds, strengths, and abilities. This passage underscores the importance of ensuring that every member feels welcomed, valued, and included in the church community. Just as every part of the body contributes to its overall health and function, every individual, including those with sensory sensitivities, has a vital role to play in the worship community. By embracing inclusivity and accommodating diverse needs, churches can foster an environment where everyone can fully participate in worship. Furthermore, we can help build each person's capacity to actively participate and contribute to the body of Christ. Worship communities have an opportunity to create spaces where individuals with sensory sensitivities can engage in spiritual practices and feel a sense of belonging. This guide offers simple, practical suggestions and resources to enhance the worship experience for individuals with sensory sensitivities and promote a more inclusive community.

Let's dive in together, as we learn, adapt, and grow in our understanding of how we can serve and engage those with sensory sensitivity. Together, let's create worship spaces that embrace diversity and nurture the spiritual growth and well-being of all individuals.

# **Understanding Sensory Sensitivities**

## WHAT IS SENSORY SENSITIVITY?

*Sensory sensitivity is characterized by heightened emotional responsiveness, increased sensitivity to environmental stimuli, and a tendency to process information deeply. Biologically based, this trait is estimated to appear in approximately 15-20% of the population and influences how individuals perceive and interact with their surroundings. Although sensory sensitivity is often seen in individuals with certain diagnoses like ADHD, Autism, Anxiety, and PTSD, not everyone with sensory sensitivity has these diagnoses, and not everyone with these diagnoses experiences sensory sensitivity in the same way.*

In the context of religious communities and worship services, individuals with sensory sensitivities may have both strengths and challenges that can significantly impact their participation and overall experience. For example, individuals with sensory sensitivities often possess heightened attention to detail, deep emotional connections to spiritual experiences, and a profound appreciation for sensory-rich rituals – all of which may enrich their full and conscious participation in worship. However, they may also encounter challenges such as difficulty with sensory overload, heightened anxiety in crowded or noisy environments, and challenges with social interactions. By understanding the specific needs and experiences of people with sensory sensitivities, ministry leaders can proactively create worship environments that honor their strengths, address their challenges, and foster a sense of belonging and spiritual growth for everyone in the worship community. This section will explore in detail the strengths and challenges faced by individuals with sensory sensitivities during worship services.

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population**

## WHY DO WE NEED PEOPLE WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITY IN OUR CHURCHES?

Individuals with sensory sensitivities bring unique strengths and qualities that make them an important and valuable part of the body of Christ and their worship community. While they may face certain challenges in navigating sensory, social, and emotional aspects of worship services, recognizing and appreciating the strengths they bring is crucial. These strengths may include heightened attention to detail, deep emotional connections to spiritual experiences, and a profound appreciation for sensory-rich rituals.

### Heightened Empathy **01**

*Individuals with sensory sensitivities often exhibit heightened sensitivity to the needs and emotions of others. They possess a remarkable capacity for empathy, compassion, and understanding. This sensitivity allows them to connect deeply with the spiritual experiences and struggles of others, providing comfort, support, and a listening ear. This empathy enables them to create meaningful connections and foster a sense of community within the worship setting.*

### **02** Deep Appreciation for Beauty & Meaning

*People with sensory sensitivity tend to process information deeply and have a keen eye for detail. They often have a deep appreciation for beauty, art, and symbolism. This unique perspective enhances their ability to recognize and embrace the sacred and transcendent aspects of worship. Their attention to detail can enrich worship experiences by highlighting the significance of rituals, symbols, and moments that might be overlooked by others. Their presence adds depth and richness to the collective worship experience.*

### Reflective & Thoughtful Nature **03**

*Individuals with sensory sensitivities often have a reflective and introspective nature. They engage in deep thinking and pondering, seeking to understand and make sense of their own spiritual journey. This introspection can inspire others in the worship community to engage in deeper reflections, fostering personal growth and a greater understanding of faith. This thoughtful nature can also contribute to meaningful discussions and dialogues, encouraging others to explore and articulate their own beliefs and experiences.*

### **04** Highly Perceptive

*People with sensory sensitivities have a heightened ability to observe and notice subtleties in their surroundings. They may pick up on nuances in worship services that others might miss, such as shifts in atmosphere, emotional undercurrents, or the impact of sensory elements. These perceptive observations can provide valuable insights for worship and ministry leaders, helping them tailor the worship experience to be more engaging and impactful for everyone.*

### Commitment to Authenticity & Sincerity **05**

*Individuals with sensory sensitivities often have a deep desire for authenticity and genuineness in their worship experience. They appreciate sincere expressions of faith and seek meaningful connections with God and others. Their commitment to authenticity encourages an atmosphere of vulnerability, transparency, and honest worship within the community. Their presence reminds others of the importance of being true to oneself, fostering an environment where individuals can bring their whole selves to worship.*

By recognizing and embracing the strengths of individuals with sensory sensitivities, worship communities can benefit from and celebrate their distinct contributions.

## WHY IT IS HARD FOR PEOPLE WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITY TO BE IN OUR CHURCHES?

While individuals with sensory sensitivities possess important strengths, it is essential to recognize and understand the challenges they may face during worship services. The combination of sensory, social, and emotional factors in worship settings can present difficulties for them. Here are some key challenges they might encounter:

### Sensory Overload & Overstimulation 01

*People with sensory sensitivities often have heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli. Loud music, bright or flickering lights, strong scents, standing for prolonged periods, and crowded spaces commonly found in worship services can quickly overwhelm and overstimulate individuals with high sensitivity. These sensory experiences may lead to increased stress, anxiety, or sensory overload, making it challenging for them to fully engage in worship and maintain a sense of calm and focus.*

### 02 Social Interactions & Navigating Social Dynamics

*Worship services involve various social interactions, such as greeting others, participating in group activities, or communal singing. Individuals with sensory sensitivities may find it demanding to navigate social dynamics effectively. They may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of interactions, struggle with small talk, or find it challenging to connect with others in a large group setting. This difficulty in social engagement can lead to feelings of isolation or exclusion within the worship community.*

### Emotional Intensity & Vulnerability 03

*Religious services often evoke deep emotions, spiritual intensity, and collective religious experiences. Individuals with sensory sensitivities may have heightened emotional responsiveness and experience intense emotional reactions. The emotional nature of worship services can result in emotional exhaustion or increased vulnerability for individuals with sensory sensitivities, potentially impacting their overall well-being and ability to fully engage with the worship experience.*

### 04 Sensitivity to Transitions & Change

*People with sensory sensitivities tend to be more sensitive to transitions and changes in their environment. Worship services often involve transitions between different elements, such as music, prayers, sermons, and rituals. These transitions, along with changes in sensory stimuli or routines, can be challenging for individuals with sensory sensitivities to adapt to and may cause heightened anxiety or discomfort.*

### Pressure to Conform & Participate 05

*In worship services, there may be societal or community expectations for individuals to conform and participate in certain ways. This pressure to conform can create additional stress and anxiety for individuals with sensory sensitivities, as they may struggle with certain forms of participation or expression that do not align with their sensory and emotional sensitivities. For example, some people with sensory sensitivities may find it challenging to engage in communal singing or prolonged periods of standing during worship services, which are often expected forms of participation. Inability to partake in these activities can lead to feelings of guilt, self-doubt, or a sense of inadequacy within the worshiping community.*

Recognizing sensory sensitivities and implementing gradual adjustments tailored to their needs can enable the worshiping community to support individuals.

**Nearly all  
worship  
communities  
serve individuals  
with sensory  
sensitivities.**

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. *Have we noticed any signs in our community that might indicate individuals with sensory sensitivities are struggling with the worship services?*
2. *How can we incorporate the strengths of individuals with sensory sensitivities into our worship service? How can we make them feel valued as a part of the congregation?*

# Supporting Worship Experiences — FOR THOSE WITH — Sensory Sensitivity

*Nearly all worship communities serve individuals with sensory sensitivities. This Resource Guide is designed for ministry leaders to create inclusive worship environments and is based on literature review, survey data, and insights from ministry leaders.*

## WHY & HOW Sensory Sensitivity Matters

Importance of inclusivity in the body of Christ, emphasizing every member's value.

Diverse backgrounds, strengths, and abilities enrich worship experiences.

Simple, practical strategies to enhance worship for individuals with sensory sensitivities.

## UNDERSTANDING Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory sensitivity: heightened emotional responsiveness, sensitivity to stimuli.

Not limited to specific diagnoses; it affects 15-20% of the population.

Both strengths (e.g., empathy, deep appreciation for meaning) and challenges (e.g., sensory overload, social difficulties) exist.

## STRENGTHS of Individuals with Sensory Sensitivities

Heightened Empathy

Deep Appreciation for Beauty and Meaning

Reflective and Thoughtful Nature

Above-Average Perception and Observation

Commitment to Authenticity and Sincerity

## CHALLENGES Faced by Individuals with Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory Overload and Overstimulation

Social Interactions and Navigating Social Dynamics

Emotional Intensity and Vulnerability

Sensitivity to Transitions and Change

Pressure to Conform and Participate

Learn more about how you can support those with  
Sensory Sensitivity at [samford.edu/sensorysensitivity](https://samford.edu/sensorysensitivity)

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# Supporting Worship Participation

**Seven Key  
Strategies  
for Individuals  
with Sensory  
Sensitivities**

People with sensory sensitivities and their families often need additional support to fully participate in worship services. Despite this pressing need, both academic literature and practical resources for aiding individuals with sensory sensitivity in worship settings are scarce. To bridge this gap, we embarked on a research study. Our main goal was to better understand the challenges individuals with sensory sensitivity face during worship and how they manage them. We also wanted to learn about the strategies currently used by worshiping communities to support them.

We strongly believe that individuals with sensory sensitivities and their families know their needs best, while ministry leaders are skilled at implementing practices within their congregations. In this section, we will **EXPLORE SEVEN ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES** aimed at cultivating inclusive and accommodating worship environments for individuals with sensory sensitivities. These strategies have been carefully selected based on feedback from both individuals with sensory sensitivities and ministry leaders, who identified them as the most successful in facilitating a positive worship experience. Each strategy is accompanied by practical tips and actionable steps to guide you in effectively implementing these principles within your worship community.

## TAILORING STRATEGIES FOR YOUR FAITH COMMUNITY

Remember, the suggestions in this guide are general recommendations and are meant as a menu of options. As a ministry leader, it's important to thoughtfully adapt them to align with your faith community's unique resources, practices, beliefs, and traditions. Keep in mind:

- **Making your church more inclusive** doesn't have to be overwhelming. Even small changes can make a big difference. Begin by making gradual changes that suit your church's unique needs and opportunities.
- **Prayerfully consider how to integrate** these ideas in a way that honors your theological convictions and rich worship traditions. Approach changes through the lens of your faith tradition, maintaining theological integrity while increasing inclusion.
- **Consult with church leaders and individuals** with sensory sensitivities to ensure changes respect their needs and preferences. Remember, those with sensory differences are experts on their own experiences; involve them in decision-making.
- **Connect with other ministry leaders** who have made changes to support sensory sensitivities. Their experiences can offer helpful guidance.
- **View this as an ongoing journey;** continually re-evaluate and enhance supportive practices over time.

Let's explore these strategies together, empowering us to create worship environments that are truly accommodating for all.

# Seven Key Strategies

- 1 **CREATE A SENSORY-FRIENDLY SPACE**
- 2 **PROVIDE SELF-REGULATION OPPORTUNITIES**
- 3 **CREATE AN UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY**
- 4 **OFFER FLEXIBLE WORSHIP OPTIONS**
- 5 **PROVIDE SENSORY-FRIENDLY RESOURCES**
- 6 **LISTEN AND COMMUNICATE OPENLY**
- 7 **WORK TOGETHER TO MEET UNIQUE NEEDS**

**Small  
adjustments to  
the worship  
environment  
can go  
a long way**



#### STRATEGY #1

## Create a Sensory-Friendly Space

*Small adjustments to the worship environment can go a long way in accommodating diverse sensory needs and promoting a sense of calm and belonging.*

#### PRACTICAL TIPS:

- **Ensure there are clearly marked and easily accessible quiet zones**, or retreat areas within or near the worship space. (Note: If possible, this should be separated from a “cry or nursing room” or the area designated for families with young children to play, as those spaces tend to have many sensory challenges.)
- **Offer a designated quiet room** or area where the service is streamed live. This space allows those with sensory sensitivities to participate comfortably away from overwhelming stimuli.
- **Provide flexible seating options**, allowing individuals to choose locations that feel most comfortable, whether near exits, away from speakers, or in quieter areas.
- **Ensure clear pathways** and easy access to exits, minimizing crowded or confined spaces that can be overwhelming.
- **Designate relaxation areas** outside the worship space where individuals can take breaks and decompress in a calming environment.
- **Provide sensory maps** or guides that outline the different areas of the worship space, highlighting quieter zones, exits, and available resources.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. *How can we work together to identify specific environmental factors within our worship venue that contribute to sensory overload or discomfort for individuals?*
2. *What adjustments can we make to (i.e., seating arrangements, lighting, quiet zones, etc.) to create a more comfortable worship space for everyone?*

**Empower  
individuals  
to manage  
sensory  
overload and  
emotional  
responses.**

## STRATEGY #2

# Provide Self-Regulation Opportunities

*Empower individuals to manage sensory overload and emotional responses by providing tools and practices for self-regulation. These techniques, such as guided prayer and breathing exercises, promote relaxation, focus, and emotional well-being during worship services. Although these supports might be especially helpful for those with sensory sensitivity, they can be a blessing to all!*

### PRACTICAL TIPS:

- **Offer posters with calming imagery, scripture verses**, or affirmations that individuals can focus on when feeling overwhelmed.
- **Incorporate moments of silence or reflection** into the service to allow individuals to center themselves and manage sensory overload.
- **Provide printed resources** with guided prayer prompts, meditation scripts, or relaxation exercises that individuals can access before, during, or after the service. Both a Breathing Exercises Guide and Prayer/Meditation Prompts can be found in the resource section.
- **Host a workshop** for children and adults on guided prayer, grounding techniques, and breathing exercises tailored for worship settings. Alternatively, invite a local counselor to discuss calming practices and managing intense emotions or disruptive behaviors during worship.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. *In what ways can we identify local resources and professionals that could support our efforts to empower self-regulation in our congregations?*
2. *How can we easily integrate opportunities for self-regulation into our church's regular services?*

**Create a  
supportive  
community  
where individuals  
feel understood,  
accepted, and  
connected.**



### STRATEGY #3

## Create an Understanding Community

*Create a supportive community where individuals feel understood, accepted, and connected. Through peer support groups, buddy systems, and training, foster empathy, and mutual understanding among congregation members, enhancing the overall worship experience for everyone.*

### PRACTICAL TIPS:

- **Facilitate a regular meetup** of individuals and families with sensory sensitivities to connect and just be together. For people who often feel different, a simple sense of belonging is an incredible gift.
- **Consider providing access to resources** such as books, articles, online forums, and community support groups where individuals with sensory sensitivity and their loved ones can learn from others and share their experiences.
- **Establish a “sensory buddy” program** that pairs individuals with sensory sensitivities with trained volunteers or peers who can provide companionship, emotional support, and assistance during services.
- **Organize educational workshops or seminars** led by experts or experienced families to raise awareness about sensory processing differences, communication strategies, and coping techniques.
- **Develop a mentorship program** that connects families newly navigating sensory sensitivities with experienced caregivers or individuals who can offer guidance, resources, and encouragement.
- Before introducing them to the main church service, **try out the strategies in smaller settings** like small groups or children’s services. This way, they can be tested, tweaked, and receive feedback from real experiences before rolling them out to everyone.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. *How can we actively foster an environment where individuals with sensory sensitivities feel genuinely valued and connected within our congregation?*
2. *How can we leverage existing resources within our congregation to implement initiatives like support groups, buddy systems, and training?*

# Adjust routines and provide alternatives to accommodate individual sensory preferences and boundaries

## STRATEGY #4

### Offer Flexible Worship Options

*Adjust routines and provide alternatives to accommodate individual sensory preferences and boundaries. By offering diverse worship formats, flexible attendance, and meaningful opportunities to step away from the service, you ensure individuals can fully participate while honoring their unique needs.*

#### PRACTICAL TIPS:

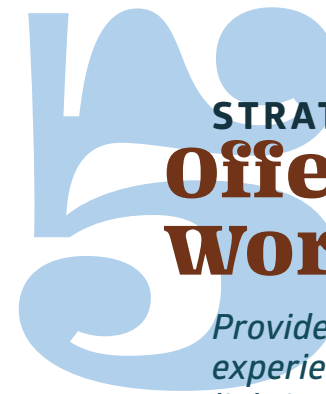
- **Provide online streaming or smaller, more intimate gatherings as alternatives** to traditional in-person services for those who may find large crowds overwhelming.
- **Explore outdoor or nature-based worship experiences**, allowing congregants to connect with their surroundings through sensory experiences like feeling the warmth of the sun, breathing fresh air, and listening to natural sounds.
- If you offer multiple services, **consider having a “sensory-friendly” service option** with reduced sensory stimuli, such as dimmed lighting, minimized use of visual effects, and softer music levels. Keeping the environment basic may be good for those with sensory sensitivity but is also often preferred by others.
- **Encourage congregants that are struggling** to participate to arrive late, leave early, or take breaks as needed to manage sensory overwhelm during services.
- **Consider creating a calming walking path or prayer labyrinth**, either indoors or outdoors, where people can calm down when feeling overwhelmed.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. *What alternative worship formats can we offer to people who may find traditional services overwhelming?*
2. *Could any of these options be integrated with our current ministries or initiatives? Is our community's worship imagination expansive enough to hold diverse practices of worship?*

**Provide  
tangible  
resources  
and aids  
to support  
sensory  
experiences  
during worship  
services.**



#### STRATEGY #5

## Offer Flexible Worship Options

*Provide tangible resources and aids to support sensory experiences during worship services. From sensory-friendly lighting and materials to guided prayer and sensory toolkits, offer a range of tools and accommodations to help individuals engage fully and comfortably in worship.*

#### PRACTICAL TIPS:

- **Stock your “quiet retreat” area with sensory-friendly resources** like weighted lap pads, fidget toys, or noise-canceling headphones.
- **Encourage congregants to bring their own sensory aids** or comfort items.
- **Offer printed sensory-friendly worship handouts**, containing simple techniques for managing sensory overload, along with guidance on available resources and actions to take if feeling overwhelmed during the service.
- **Consider setting up a “prayerground” in your worship space**—a designated area where children can engage in quiet activities during the service. Equip it with soft seating, toys, books, and art supplies.
- **Create sensory tool kits containing items** such as fidget toys or stress balls for congregants to use. (Ideas for the Creating a Sensory Tool Kits for both adults and children can be found in the Resources section.)

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. *What steps can we take to ensure our worship venue is equipped with sensory-friendly resources?*
2. *How can we ensure that the sensory aids and tools we provide are readily available and clearly communicated to congregants, facilitating their easy access during worship services?*

**Establish  
open lines of  
communication  
to foster a  
supportive  
relationship  
with individuals  
with sensory  
sensitivity and  
their families.**



**STRATEGY #6**  
**Listen and  
Communicate Openly**

*Establish open lines of communication to foster a supportive relationship with individuals with sensory sensitivity and their families. By actively listening to their perspectives and valuing their insights, you can create an environment where they feel heard and respected.*

**PRACTICAL TIPS:**

- **Assign a designated point of contact within your church** who is knowledgeable about sensory sensitivities and can serve as a direct resource for individuals and families.
- **Schedule regular check-ins or feedback sessions**, either in-person or virtual, to discuss experiences, concerns, and suggestions regarding accommodations for sensory sensitivities.
- **Create opportunities for individuals with sensory sensitivity** and their families to share their feedback through surveys, suggestion boxes, or dedicated communication channels.
- **Provide multiple communication channels**, such as in-person meetings, phone calls, emails, or online forums, to accommodate different preferences and schedules.

**Reflection Questions  
for Your Ministry Team:**



1. *How can we better listen to and understand the needs of individuals with sensory sensitivities and their families in our congregation?*
2. *What are some simple ways we can encourage open communication and feedback about sensory support in our worshiping community?*

**Having collaborative conversations with individuals with sensory sensitivity and their families is crucial for developing a personalized plan**



#### STRATEGY #7

## Work Together to Meet Unique Needs

*Having collaborative conversations with individuals with sensory sensitivity and their families is crucial for developing a personalized plan to address their unique needs and preferences. These discussions help ensure that support strategies are tailored to each individual's specific challenges and strengths.*

#### PRACTICAL TIPS:

- **Incorporate open-ended questions** during new member or visitor meetings to identify individuals or families who may benefit from sensory accommodations.
- **Initiate a conversation** with the person with sensory sensitivity and their family to identify their sensory preferences, triggers, and coping strategies. (Sample collaborative conversation questions can be found in the resources section).
- **Discuss available resources and accommodations** at your worship space, and ask which options would be most helpful for them.
- **Regularly check in with them** to see if any changes or additional support are needed.

### Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. *How can we improve our awareness and responsiveness to signs that someone may be experiencing discomfort or challenges due to sensory sensitivities?*
2. *How can we work together with individuals and families affected by sensory sensitivities to create a plan that truly reflects their needs and preferences?*

# CREATING AN ACTION PLAN

Now that you have familiarized yourselves with the seven recommendations and practices outlined in this resource guide, it's time to take the next step and develop an action plan for implementing these strategies within your worship community. By creating a plan, you can ensure that the changes you make are intentional, well-coordinated, and sustainable.

You've reviewed the menu of options in the previous section. Consider where you are, and map where you want to go. Start with one step – one small change in the right direction – and when that is complete, make one more, and then one more.

Consider using a classification of “start,” “sustain,” and “stretch” levels of what a congregation might attempt (from easiest to most challenging) when determining your action steps.

**START:** Simple changes or introduction of new practices that build upon existing ones. They can serve as entry points into the broader change.

*Example: Making sensory toolkits available.*

**SUSTAIN:** Maintaining and strengthening initiatives that have proven successful. These efforts focus on ensuring that sensory-friendly practices become ingrained in the culture of the congregation.

*Example: Expanding an already existing youth mentoring program, so the mentors are trained in sensory sensitivity.*

**STRETCH:** Ambitious strategies pushing the congregation's boundaries. These actions require greater resources, commitment, and potentially a shift in mindset or organizational culture.

*Example: Having one sensory-friendly service per month.*

By categorizing your action steps into these levels, you can develop a phased approach that builds momentum and momentum over time, gradually increasing the congregation's capacity to support individuals with sensory sensitivities effectively. Using the template below can help your ministry team, church leaders, and congregants to be on the same page about goals and opportunities.

Sensory Friendly Practice	Who is Responsible?	Who else will be involved?	What is the timeline?	What resources or supports are needed?

Share this vision, seek feedback and input, and provide ongoing education to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to understand any changes being made. Then, celebrate your progress and learn and adapt things that could be better. A more detailed process on creating an action plan can be found in the resources section.

Start with one step – one small change in the right direction

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



1. How well do we currently understand the sensory needs and challenges of individuals within our worshipping community?
2. What specific changes can we prioritize to make our worship environment more sensory-friendly?
3. How can we foster ongoing communication and collaboration within our congregation to support individuals with sensory sensitivities?

# Conclusion

*At its core, facilitating sensory-inclusive worship experiences is a discipleship issue that aligns with the biblical call to embrace all members of the body of Christ. Ministry leaders have the opportunity to cultivate worship environments where every person feels welcomed, valued, and able to fully participate - environments that authentically reflect the diverse abilities and needs present in the church community. Opening the doors wider to include people with sensory sensitivity allows churches to walk alongside all who are made in the very image of God as they come to grow their faith and understanding of their place in the body of Christ. Just as every part of the human body is vital for its overall health and function, so too is the contribution of each individual essential for the flourishing of the body of Christ. When worship practices accommodate the sensory needs of some, the entire community benefits from a richer, more multifaceted experience of connection with God and one another.*

Through collaboration with church leaders and consultation with people with sensory sensitivities within the community, adaptations can be tailored to align with the unique practices, beliefs, and traditions of your church. As the journey toward creating sensory-friendly worship spaces unfolds, it's crucial to recognize the importance of implementing small changes over time. By gradually introducing adjustments and accommodations, the worshiping community can adapt and evolve in its commitment to inclusivity. Seeking feedback and remaining open to growth enable the community to continually refine its approach, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation.

Through prayerful collaboration, gradual implementation of changes, and a posture of continuous learning, worship communities can become spaces where individuals of diverse sensory needs feel a profound sense of belonging. The resources provided offer further support for this journey toward becoming a more vibrant reflection of the body of Christ in its beautifully varied forms. May this be a catalyst for worship communities to embody the radically inclusive love of Christ, where all members can freely offer their unique gifts and perspectives as vital parts of His body.

**At its core,  
facilitating sensory-  
inclusive worship  
experiences is a  
discipleship issue  
that aligns with  
the biblical call  
to embrace all  
members of the  
body of Christ.**

# Helpful Resources

**Infographics**

**Questions**

**Action Plans**

**Case Studies**

**Tool Kits**

# Infographics

# Supporting Worship Experiences

## — FOR THOSE WITH — Sensory Sensitivity

*Nearly all worship communities serve individuals with sensory sensitivities. This Resource Guide is designed for ministry leaders to create inclusive worship environments and is based on literature review, survey data, and insights from ministry leaders.*

### WHY & HOW Sensory Sensitivity Matters

Importance of inclusivity in the body of Christ, emphasizing every member's value.

Diverse backgrounds, strengths, and abilities enrich worship experiences.

Simple, practical strategies to enhance worship for individuals with sensory sensitivities.

### UNDERSTANDING Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory sensitivity: heightened emotional responsiveness, sensitivity to stimuli.

Not limited to specific diagnoses; it affects 15-20% of the population.

Both strengths (e.g., empathy, deep appreciation for meaning) and challenges (e.g., sensory overload, social difficulties) exist.

### STRENGTHS of Individuals with Sensory Sensitivities

Heightened Empathy

Deep Appreciation for Beauty and Meaning

Reflective and Thoughtful Nature

Above-Average Perception and Observation

Commitment to Authenticity and Sincerity

### CHALLENGES Faced by Individuals with Sensory Sensitivities

Sensory Overload and Overstimulation

Social Interactions and Navigating Social Dynamics

Emotional Intensity and Vulnerability

Sensitivity to Transitions and Change

Pressure to Conform and Participate

Learn more about how you can support those with  
Sensory Sensitivity at [samford.edu/sensorysensitivity](https://samford.edu/sensorysensitivity)

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# Seven Key Strategies

1

#### Create a Sensory-Friendly Space

- Mark quiet zones or retreat areas.
- Provide flexible seating and clear pathways.

2

#### Provide Self-Regulation Opportunities

- Incorporate moments of silence.
- Offer printed resources on deep breathing and guided prayer.

3

#### Create an Understanding Community

- Provide access to resources and support groups.
- Establish a sensory buddy program.

4

#### Offer Flexible Worship Options

- Provide online or smaller gatherings.
- Consider sensory-friendly service options.

5

#### Provide Sensory-Friendly Resources

- Stock quiet areas with sensory aids.
- Offer handouts explaining church resources.

6

#### Listen and Communicate Openly

- Assign a designated point of contact.
- Schedule regular check-ins.

7

#### Work Together to Meet Unique Needs

- Discuss available resources and accommodations.
- Regularly check in for adjustments.

#### ACTION PLAN DEVELOPMENT:

- Assess current practices and sensory environment.
- Involve individuals with sensory sensitivities in decision-making.
- Adapt strategies to align with denomination beliefs.
- Engage the community for input and prioritize changes.
- Assign responsibilities and set timelines.

#### CONCLUSION:

- Importance of recognizing and embracing strengths of sensory-sensitive individuals.
- Addressing challenges through gradual adjustments tailored to their needs.
- Providing support fosters inclusivity, belonging, and fuller participation in worship experiences.

Learn more about how you can support those with  
Sensory Sensitivity at [samford.edu/sensorysensitivity](https://samford.edu/sensorysensitivity)

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# Survey Results\*

People with sensory sensitivity exhibit heightened emotional responsiveness, increased sensitivity to environmental stimuli, and deep information processing. Worship services present challenges for them due to sensory, social, and emotional factors. However, academic research and practical resources on sensory sensitivity in worship contexts is limited.

## challenges

### TOP CHALLENGES REPORTED

PEOPLE WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITY IDENTIFIED SEVERAL KEY CHALLENGES DURING WORSHIP SERVICES:	39.8%	→ Prolonged periods of sitting or standing
	36.1%	→ Lengthy prayers or rituals
	33.8%	→ Loud music/singing/clapping
	32.2%	→ Confined or crowded spaces
	29.9%	→ Large crowds
	28.1%	→ Too much social interaction

## feelings

### RESULTING FEELINGS

AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THESE CHALLENGES, INDIVIDUALS WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITY REPORTED EXPERIENCING A RANGE OF EMOTIONS:	48.6%	→ Feeling overwhelmed and anxious
	38.0%	→ Stressed, on edge
	36.1%	→ Disconnected from the worship experience
	32.2%	→ Exhausted, drained from "keeping it together"
	22.3%	→ Misunderstood, judged by the congregation
	21.7%	→ Guilty, ashamed for not fully engaging
	18.2%	→ Isolated, excluded from the worship community

\* 702 adults with sensory sensitivity, 514 parents of children with sensory sensitivity, and 106 ministry leaders completed a survey.

## responses

### BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

PEOPLE WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITY COPE WITH THESE FEELINGS BY:	47.8%	→ Attending religious services less frequently
	32.3%	→ Avoiding certain types of services
	28.5%	→ Leaving early or arriving late to services
	28.1%	→ Seeking alternative ways to engage with their faith
	26.9%	→ Decreasing level of participation during services
	14.1%	→ Stopping attending religious services altogether

## strategies

### EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR REGULATION

DESPITE THESE CHALLENGES, INDIVIDUALS FOUND SEVERAL STRATEGIES HELPFUL IN REGULATING THEIR SENSORY EXPERIENCES DURING SERVICES:	37.3%	→ Seeking solitude or taking breaks
	37.0%	→ Engaging in personal prayer
	30.0%	→ Practicing deep breathing exercises
	29.8%	→ Sitting in the back of the room
	21.8%	→ Using sensory aids such as fidgets or stress balls

### MINISTRY LEADERS

THESE FINDINGS UNDERSCORE THE IMPORTANCE OF ENHANCING EDUCATION AND RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY LEADERS TO CREATE MORE INCLUSIVE WORSHIP ENVIRONMENTS.

- 68.9% of ministry leaders were moderately familiar with sensory sensitivities, but only 32% had formal education.
- Despite this, 88.1% were open to implementing changes for better support.
- Only 23.2% were familiar with available resources.
- Nonetheless, 56% tried to implement supportive strategies.
  - EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES INCLUDED:
    - Providing a designated quiet or calming space (45.3%)
    - Encouraging individuals to communicate their needs or preferences to clergy or volunteers (28.2%)
    - Providing noise-canceling headphones or earplugs (22%)
    - Implementing a support system within the congregation (26.9%).
- These findings underscore the importance of enhancing education and resources for ministry leaders to create more inclusive worship environments.

# Questions

# Sample Collaborative Conversation Questions

- 1. WHAT ASPECTS** of our worship services do you particularly enjoy or find meaningful?
- 2. CAN YOU SHARE** with us any challenges you've faced during worship services due to sensory overload?
- 3. HOW CAN WE ENSURE** that you are able to participate in our worship services as someone with sensory sensitivities?
- 4. ARE THERE PARTICULAR ASPECTS** of our worship environment that you find uncomfortable or overwhelming? How might we make adjustments to better accommodate you?
- 5. WHAT STRATEGIES** or accommodations have you found helpful in managing sensory challenges during worship?
- 6. HOW CAN WE IMPROVE** our communication and understanding of sensory sensitivities within our congregation to provide better support for you and others?
- 7. ARE THERE ANY RESOURCES** or tools you believe would assist you in participating more comfortably in our worship services?
- 8. WHAT STEPS** do you think we should take as a community to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for everyone, including those with sensory sensitivities?
- 9. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE** you'd like us to know or consider to ensure that you feel comfortable and supported during worship services?
- 10. WHAT WAY WOULD YOU LIKE TO SERVE IN THE CHURCH?**

**Through prayerful collaboration, gradual implementation of changes, and a posture of continuous learning, worship communities can become spaces where individuals of diverse sensory needs feel a profound sense of belonging.**



# Action Plan

# Detailed Guide to Creating an Action Plan

## 1 ASSESS THE CURRENT SITUATION

Begin by conducting an assessment of your worship community's current practices, sensory environment, and the experiences of individuals with sensory sensitivities. This evaluation will help you identify specific areas that require adjustment and understand the needs and challenges faced by individuals with sensory sensitivities in your community.

- **Reflect on your worship space:** Walk through your worship spaces with a focus on sensory experiences. Consider the layout, lighting, acoustics, and overall sensory atmosphere. Identify potential triggers.
- **Review worship elements:** Evaluate the music, visuals, scents, and other sensory components present in your worship services. Determine which elements may pose challenges.
- **Engage with the community:** Seek input from individuals with sensory sensitivities and their families to understand their experiences, needs, and suggestions for improvement.

## 2 PRIORITIZE CHANGES

Based on your assessment, identify the key areas where adjustments need to be made. Consider the practicality, feasibility, and potential impact of each change. Prioritize changes that will have the most significant positive impact and align with your community's resources and capacity.

- **Identify Key Areas for Adjustment:** Based on the assessment, pinpoint the specific areas that require modification.
- **Consider Practicality and Feasibility:** Evaluate the practicality and feasibility of implementing changes in each identified area. Assess factors such as available resources, time constraints, and the support of stakeholders within your community. Prioritize changes that are realistic and achievable within your community's capabilities.
- **Assess Potential Impact:** Evaluate the potential impact of each proposed change. Prioritize changes that are likely to have the most significant positive impact while aligning with your community's values and goals. Remember, small changes can make a big difference.

## 3 ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITIES

Establish clear roles and responsibilities for implementing the identified changes. Designate a team or specific individuals who will be responsible for coordinating and overseeing each aspect of the action plan.

- **Identify team members or volunteers:** Select individuals who have a passion for supporting people with sensory sensitivities.
- **Delegate tasks:** Assign specific responsibilities to team members based on their strengths and expertise.

## 4 SET TIMELINES AND GOALS

Determine realistic timelines for each phase of implementation. Break down the action plan into manageable milestones, and establish measurable goals to track progress and ensure accountability.

- **Establish short-term and long-term goals:** Set achievable goals for immediate changes, such as providing sensory resources, as well as long-term goals.
- **Create a timeline:** Develop a timeline that outlines the implementation process, including key milestones, deadlines, and checkpoints for progress evaluation.

## 5 COMMUNICATE AND ENGAGE

Effective communication is essential to gain support, build understanding, and foster collaboration within your worship community. Engage with congregation members, leadership, and individuals with sensory sensitivities to keep them informed, involved, and invested in the process.

- **Share the vision:** Clearly communicate the purpose, goals, and benefits of creating a sensory-friendly worship environment to garner support and enthusiasm.
- **Seek feedback and input:** Regularly engage with individuals with sensory sensitivities and their loved ones to gather feedback, suggestions, and insights on the effectiveness of implemented changes.
- **Provide ongoing education:** Offer educational resources, workshops, or training sessions to increase awareness and understanding of sensory sensitivity among congregation members and leaders.

## 6 EVALUATE AND ADJUST

Regularly evaluate the impact of the implemented changes and adjust your approach as needed.

- **Conduct assessments:** Periodically reassess the sensory environment, worship elements, and community engagement to identify areas for improvement.
- **Adapt and innovate:** Embrace a culture of learning and adaptation, being open to new ideas and strategies that better meet the needs.
- **Celebrate progress:** Recognize and celebrate the milestones achieved in creating a more sensory-friendly and inclusive worship community.



# Case Studies

## NAVIGATING OVERWHELMING SENSORY EXPERIENCES AND CROWDS

*BACKGROUND: John is an adult who experiences sensory sensitivities. He finds the sensory environment during worship services overwhelming, particularly in crowded settings. John often arrives late to services to avoid the initial rush and prefers to sit in the back of the church. He tends to keep to himself during worship services, finding it challenging to engage in greetings and participate in the social aspects of worship.*

### CHALLENGES FACED BY JOHN

- 1. Overwhelming Sensory Environment:** John experiences sensory overload during worship services, especially in crowded settings, due to factors like lighting, sound, and proximity to others.
- 2. Social Anxiety:** John finds it challenging to engage in greetings and participate in the social aspects of worship, leading to feelings of isolation and discomfort.
- 3. Limited Engagement:** John's preference for arriving late and sitting at the back of the church limits his ability to fully participate in worship activities and connect with the congregation.

### STRUGGLES & EMOTIONAL IMPACT

- 1. Anxiety in Crowded Spaces:** The presence of a large number of people in a worship service triggers anxiety for John. He may experience a heightened sense of self-consciousness and a fear of being overwhelmed by the sensory stimuli and social interactions.
- 2. Feeling Socially Awkward:** John's difficulty with greetings and engaging in social interactions during worship services can make him feel socially awkward. He may struggle to find common ground and establish meaningful connections with others.
- 3. Sense of Isolation:** John's preference for sitting in the back of the church and limited social engagement can lead to a sense of isolation within the church community. He desires to feel connected and accepted but finds it challenging to navigate the social dynamics of worship services.

### STRENGTHS

- 1. Self-Awareness:** John demonstrates self-awareness by recognizing his sensory challenges, particularly in crowded environments. This awareness allows him to take proactive steps to manage his sensory experiences.
- 2. Adaptive Strategies:** John has developed adaptive strategies, such as arriving late and sitting in the back of the church, to minimize sensory overload. These strategies help him maintain a level of comfort during worship services.
- 3. Commitment to Faith:** Despite his challenges with social interactions, John's commitment to his faith remains strong. He values the spiritual aspects of worship services and desires to deepen his connection with God.

### SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Work Together to Meet Unique Needs:** Discuss available resources and accommodations with John to identify specific adjustments that would make worship services more comfortable for him.
- 2. Create an Understanding Community:** Facilitate introductions between John and other congregation members who share similar interests or experiences.
- 3. Create a Sensory-Friendly Space:** Mark quiet zones or retreat areas where John can retreat to when feeling overwhelmed.
- 4. Provide Self-Regulation Opportunities:** Offer printed resources on deep breathing exercises and guided prayer to help John regulate his emotions during worship.
- 5. Provide Sensory-Friendly Resources:** Stock quiet areas with sensory aids like noise-canceling headphones or stress balls to help John manage sensory overload.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



- 1. What concrete steps can we take to modify our worship environment and interactions to accommodate John's sensory sensitivities while encouraging his active participation?**
- 2. In what ways can we actively engage John in discussions about potential adjustments and ensure that his input guides our efforts to create a more inclusive worship experience for him?**
- 3. How can we encourage intentional connections and meaningful relationships for individuals like John who may struggle with social interactions? How can we create opportunities for involvement and participation that align with their comfort levels?**

## SUPPORTING FAMILIES WHO HAVE CHILDREN WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITY

*Emily is a 6-year-old girl with sensory sensitivities. She experiences difficulties in regulating her sensory responses, particularly to unexpected and unpredictable sounds, bright lights, strong scents, and loud noises. Her parents, David and Sarah, are devoted churchgoers and wish for Emily to actively participate in the worship services. However, they often find it challenging to navigate the unpredictable sensory environment of the church, which can lead to anxiety and be overwhelming for Emily. Despite their efforts to provide her with coping strategies like fidget toys and noise-canceling headphones, they have felt judged by other members of the congregation, which has further isolated them from the church community.*

### CHALLENGES FACED BY EMILY

- 1. Sensory Overload:** Emily experiences difficulties in regulating her sensory responses, particularly to unexpected sounds, bright lights, strong scents, and loud noises commonly present in worship settings. These sensory stimuli often trigger overwhelming responses, leading to distress and discomfort for Emily.
- 2. Navigating the Church Environment:** David and Sarah encounter challenges in navigating the unpredictable sensory environment of the church with Emily. They struggle to anticipate and manage potential triggers, making it challenging to attend worship services consistently and participate fully in congregational activities.
- 3. Social Isolation:** Despite their efforts to support Emily with coping strategies such as fidget toys and noise-canceling headphones, David and Sarah feel judged by other members of the congregation. This perceived judgment contributes to their sense of social isolation within the church community, hindering their ability to seek support and connection.

### STRUGGLES & EMOTIONAL IMPACT

- 1. Parental Stress and Isolation:** Sarah and Mark experience elevated levels of stress as they continuously navigate Emily's sensory challenges during church services. They may feel isolated, as their experiences and needs differ from those of other parents within the congregation.
- 2. Anxiety and Being Overwhelmed:** Emily's sensory sensitivities frequently lead to feelings of anxiety and being overwhelmed, making it difficult for her to feel at ease in worship settings. The constant sensory stimulation exacerbates her stress levels and diminishes her ability to engage meaningfully in worship activities.
- 3. Desire for Acceptance and Understanding:** Sarah and Mark long for acceptance and understanding from the church community. They hope to find empathy and support as they strive to create an inclusive environment for Emily.

### STRENGTHS

- 1. Parental Commitment:** David and Sarah are dedicated parents who are actively seeking ways to support Emily's participation in worship services.
- 2. Awareness and Advocacy:** They recognize Emily's unique sensory needs and have proactively implemented strategies like providing fidget toys and noise-canceling headphones to help her regulate her sensory experiences.
- 3. Church Involvement:** David and Sarah have a strong desire to engage with the church community and have demonstrated resilience in their efforts to find solutions that enable Emily's active participation.

### SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Create an Understanding Community:** Connect David and Sarah with a support network for families with children who have sensory challenges. Pair Emily with a buddy during services to help her regulate.
- 2. Provide Self-Regulation Opportunities:** Host a workshop for on guided prayer, grounding techniques, and breathing exercises tailored for worship settings.
- 3. Listen and Communicate Openly:** Assign a designated point of contact within the church who is knowledgeable about sensory sensitivities to assist families like David, Sarah, and Emily.
- 4. Work Together to Meet Unique Needs:** Have the point of contact periodically check in with the family to assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies and make adjustments as needed.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



- 1. What steps can we take to ensure that David and Sarah feel supported and included within the church community?**
- 2. How can we raise awareness and educate our congregation about sensory sensitivities to foster empathy and understanding?**
- 3. What specific resources and support networks can we establish or connect David and Sarah with to help them navigate the unique needs of Emily and feel more accepted within our church community?**

# HILLVIEW COMMUNITY CHURCH

( SMALL CONGREGATION )

## SMALL CONGREGATIONS SERVING MEMBERS WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITIES

*BACKGROUND: Hillview Community Church is a small congregation located in a suburban neighborhood. The church has a tight-knit community, with regular attendance averaging around 50 individuals per service. Recently, several members of the congregation expressed concerns about the inclusivity of their worship environment, particularly regarding individuals with sensory sensitivities. Recognizing the importance of accommodating diverse needs, the church leadership has decided to develop an action plan to create a more sensory-inclusive worship experience.*

### CHALLENGES

- 1. Limited Resources:** Hillview Community Church operates on a tight budget, limiting the financial resources available for renovations or specialized equipment.
- 2. Lack of Awareness:** Many members of the congregation are unfamiliar with sensory sensitivities and may require education and training to understand the needs of individuals with sensory challenges.
- 3. Space Constraints:** The church building is relatively small, and finding suitable areas for designated sensory break zones may be challenging.
- 4. Resistance to Change:** Some members of the congregation may be resistant to changes in traditional worship practices, posing a potential barrier to implementing sensory-inclusive measures.

### STRENGTHS

- 1. Close-knit Community:** The church has a strong sense of community, with members who are willing to support one another and collaborate on initiatives.
- 2. Dedicated Leadership:** The church leadership is committed to fostering inclusivity and creating a welcoming environment for all worshippers.
- 3. Flexibility:** Despite limited resources, the congregation is willing to explore creative solutions and adapt existing spaces to better accommodate individuals with sensory sensitivities.

### SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Incremental Changes:** Implement small, manageable changes over time, focusing on modifications that require minimal financial investment and can be easily integrated into existing worship practices.
- 2. Education and Training:** Organize workshops or informational sessions to educate congregation members about sensory sensitivities, their impact, and the importance of inclusivity.
- 3. Volunteer Engagement:** Establish a task force or committee composed of volunteers who are passionate about supporting individuals with sensory sensitivities to coordinate efforts and implement necessary changes.
- 4. Communication and Transparency:** Maintain open communication with the congregation throughout the process, providing regular updates, soliciting feedback, and addressing concerns to foster a sense of ownership and participation.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



- 1. How can we effectively utilize the close-knit community at Hillview Community Church to raise awareness and educate congregation members about sensory sensitivities?*
- 2. In what ways can we creatively overcome the challenge of limited resources to implement sensory-friendly measures within our church building?*
- 3. What steps can we take to navigate potential resistance to change among some members of the congregation while still moving forward with our goal?*
- 4. How can we prioritize and implement incremental changes that require minimal financial investment yet have a significant impact?*

## LARGE CONGREGATIONS SERVING MEMBERS WITH SENSORY SENSITIVITIES

*BACKGROUND: Grace Cathedral is a bustling congregation located in the heart of a vibrant city. With a weekly attendance of over 1,000 worshippers, the church offers dynamic and immersive worship experiences that include vibrant music, multimedia presentations, and engaging sermons. Recently, concerns have been raised about the accessibility of these services for individuals with sensory sensitivities. In response, the church leadership has embarked on a journey to implement sensory inclusivity measures and create a more welcoming environment for all worshippers.*

### CHALLENGES

- 1. Size and Complexity:** Grace Cathedral's large size and complex worship services present logistical challenges when considering sensory inclusivity measures. Coordinating changes across multiple service formats and venues requires careful planning and coordination.
- 2. High Volume and Intensity:** The worship services at Grace Cathedral are known for their high volume and intensity, which may pose challenges for individuals with sensory sensitivities, including those sensitive to loud noises or bright lights.
- 3. Traditional Practices:** The congregation has a strong attachment to traditional worship practices, including the use of live music, elaborate visual displays, and immersive sensory experiences, making it challenging to introduce changes that may disrupt these traditions.
- 4. Limited Awareness:** Despite the congregation's size, there may be limited awareness and understanding of sensory sensitivities among worshippers, necessitating education and awareness-building efforts.

### STRENGTHS

- 1. Resources and Expertise:** Grace Cathedral benefits from a diverse pool of talent and resources, including skilled musicians, tech-savvy volunteers, and experienced staff members who can contribute to the development and implementation of sensory inclusivity measures.
- 2. Innovation and Adaptability:** The congregation has a track record of innovation and adaptability, evidenced by its willingness to embrace new technologies and creative approaches to worship.
- 3. Strong Community Engagement:** Grace Cathedral fosters a strong sense of community among its members, who are deeply committed to supporting one another and creating a welcoming environment for all worshippers.

### SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Comprehensive Assessment:** Conduct a thorough assessment of the worship spaces, services, and sensory experiences at Grace Cathedral to identify areas for improvement and potential sensory triggers.
- 2. Low-Sensory Worship Service:** Consider establishing a weekly worship service tailored specifically for individuals with sensory sensitivities that features reduced sensory stimuli such as lower volume levels, softer lighting, and minimal visual distractions.
- 3. Quiet Retreat Area:** Designate a quiet retreat area where worshippers can retreat to during services if they become overwhelmed by sensory stimuli. This area should be equipped with comfortable seating, soft lighting, and calming decor to provide a serene and peaceful environment for individuals to regain composure and engage in worship at their own pace.
- 4. Education and Awareness:** Provide educational resources and awareness-building initiatives to increase understanding of sensory sensitivities among worshippers and foster a culture of empathy and inclusion.

## Reflection Questions for Your Ministry Team:



- 1. How can we honor the congregation's love for traditional worship practices while still making room for changes that accommodate individuals with sensory sensitivities?**
- 2. Given the size and complexity of our church, how can we work together to ensure that sensory measures are implemented effectively across all our services and venues?**
- 3. What steps can we take to ensure that the diverse talents and resources available within our congregation are effectively utilized in the development and implementation of sensory inclusivity measures?**
- 4. How can we creatively reallocate existing space to accommodate a quiet retreat space?**

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# **Creating a Sensory Tool Kit**

# SENSORY TOOLKIT FOR ADULTS

## HERE'S A GUIDE TO CREATING A SENSORY KIT TAILORED TO THE NEEDS OF ADULTS

### 1. SELECTING A CONTAINER

Choose a portable container to store the sensory items. It could be a small pouch, a durable bag, or a plastic container with a secure lid for easy transportation.

### 2. CALMING TOOLS

- **Stress Balls:** Squeezable stress balls provide tactile stimulation and help relieve tension.
- **Fidget Spinners or Fidget Cubes:** These handheld gadgets offer sensory stimulation and promote focus and relaxation.
- **Tactile Items:** Include textured items like soft fabrics, velcro, smooth stones, or textured surfaces to engage the sense of touch.

### 3. VISUAL AIDS

- **Calming Visuals:** Add calming images or photos that promote relaxation, such as nature scenes, serene landscapes, or peaceful artwork.
- **Sunglasses:** Provide items to block out bright lights or glare, offering visual relief in overwhelming environments.

### 4. AUDITORY TOOLS

- **Noise-Canceling Earplugs or Earmuffs:** Include earplugs or earmuffs to reduce noise sensitivity and provide auditory relief in noisy environments.
- **Relaxing Music or Soundtracks:** Include headphones and pre-loaded audio files with calming music, nature sounds, or guided meditation sessions.

### 5. SENSORY SOOTHERS

- **Aromatherapy Products:** Include essential oils or scented sachets with calming scents like lavender or chamomile to promote relaxation.
- **Hand Lotion or Scented Balms:** Offer scented lotions or balms for sensory soothing and tactile stimulation.

### 6. SELF-REGULATION TOOLS

- **Breathing Exercises Guide:** Include instructions or a printed guide for deep breathing exercises to promote relaxation and emotional well-being.
- **Prayer/Meditation Prompts:** Provide prayer prompts or mindfulness exercises to facilitate relaxation and stress reduction.

### 7. ADDITIONAL ITEMS

- **Personal Comfort Items:** Include any personal items that provide comfort or familiarity, such as a favorite blanket, stuffed animal, or memento.
- **Snacks and Water:** Pack healthy snacks and a water bottle to stay hydrated and regulate energy levels during stressful situations.

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING A SENSORY TOOL KIT

### 1. SELECTING TOOLS

Choose sensory tools that you find most helpful. Consider your sensory preferences and the specific situation you're in.

### 2. IDENTIFYING SENSORY NEEDS

Recognize when you're experiencing heightened stress levels. Pay attention to signs such as feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or agitated.

### 3. CREATING A CALMING ENVIRONMENT

Find a quiet space where you can use your sensory tools without distractions. Dim the lights, if possible, and minimize noise to create a soothing atmosphere.

### 4. ENGAGING WITH TOOLS

- **Tactile Tools:** Use squishy balls, textured objects, or fidget toys to provide tactile stimulation and promote relaxation. Experiment with different textures to find what works best for you.
- **Visual Aids:** Look at calming images or picture cards to relax and reduce stress. Focus on the colors, patterns, or scenes that bring you comfort.
- **Auditory Tools:** Listen to soothing music or nature sounds through headphones to block out noise. Adjust the volume to a comfortable level.
- **Scented Items:** Inhale the aroma of scented playdough, essential oils, or scented stickers to evoke feelings of calmness and relaxation.
- **Breathing and Relaxation Techniques:** Practice deep breathing exercises to reduce tension.

### 5. USING TOOLS THOUGHTFULLY

Be present as you engage with each sensory tool. Focus on the sensations and experiences it provides, allowing yourself to fully immerse in the calming effects.

### 6. EXPERIMENTING AND ADJUSTING

Explore different combinations of sensory tools and techniques to see what works best for you. Don't be afraid to adjust or switch tools based on your changing needs and preferences.

### 7. TAKING BREAKS

If you start to feel overwhelmed, take a break. Step away from the situation, practice deep breathing, or engage in another calming activity until you feel ready to return.

### 8. REFLECTING AND REASSESSING

After using the sensory tools, take a moment to reflect on how they helped you. Consider what worked well and what you might want to adjust for next time.

### 9. STORING AND MAINTAINING TOOLS

Return the sensory tools to the kit after each use to keep them organized and easily accessible for future use.

### 10. SEEKING SUPPORT

If you're struggling, don't hesitate to reach out for support from the church staff or a volunteer. You're not alone, and there are resources available to help you.

# SENSORY TOOLKIT FOR CHILDREN

## HERE'S A GUIDE TO CREATING A SENSORY KIT TAILORED TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN

### 1. SELECTING A CHILD-FRIENDLY CONTAINER

Choose a colorful and durable container that appeals to children, such as a backpack, a colorful tote bag, or a fun-themed storage box.

### 2. CALMING TOOLS

- **Squishy Toys:** Include squishy balls, stress balls, or tactile toys that provide sensory stimulation and promote relaxation.
- **Fidget Toys:** Add fidget spinners or textured fidget tools to engage tactile and visual senses.
- **Weighted Lap Pad or Stuffed Animal:** Choose a soft and comforting weighted lap pad or stuffed animal.

### 3. VISUAL AIDS

- **Calming Visuals:** Include picture cards with calming images or illustrations, such as nature scenes, animals, or favorite characters.
- **Kaleidoscope or Visual Stimulation Toys:** Offer toys that provide mesmerizing visual patterns and promote relaxation.

### 4. AUDITORY TOOLS

- **Noise-Canceling Earbuds:** Include child-sized earbuds to reduce noise sensitivity and provide auditory relief in loud environments.
- **Soothing Music or Audio Stories:** Provide headphones and pre-loaded audio files with calming music, lullabies, or soothing stories.

### 5. SENSORY SOOTHERS

- **Scented Stickers or Scratch-and-Sniff Cards:** Offer scented stickers or cards with pleasant aromas for sensory exploration.

### 6. SELF-REGULATION TOOLS

- **Breathing Tools:** Include pinwheels to facilitate deep breathing exercises and promote relaxation.
- **Relaxation Cards:** Provide visual prompts or relaxation cards with simple mindfulness exercises or calming affirmations.

### 7. ADDITIONAL ITEMS

- **Comfort Items:** Add a small stuffed animal, a cozy blanket, or a favorite toy for comfort and reassurance during stressful situations.
- **Snacks and Water:** Pack healthy snacks, juice boxes, or a water bottle to keep children nourished and hydrated.

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR PARENTS USING A SENSORY TOOL KIT WITH THEIR CHILD

### 1. UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS

Familiarize yourself with your child's sensory preferences and sensitivities. Pay attention to their reactions to different sensory stimuli and environments to better understand what calms or overstimulates them.

### 2. EXPLAINING THE PURPOSE OF THE KIT

Introduce the sensory tool kit to your child and explain its purpose in helping them regulate. Emphasize that the tools are meant to provide comfort and support during challenging moments.

### 3. SELECTING TOOLS TOGETHER

Involve your child in selecting sensory tools from the kit that they find comforting. Encourage them to choose items based on what helps them feel calm and relaxed.

### 4. CREATING A CALMING SPACE

Designate a quiet area where your child can use the sensory tools without distractions.

### 5. RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF OVERSTIMULATION

Be vigilant for signs that your child may be experiencing sensory overload or heightened stress levels. Look for cues such as agitation, irritability, withdrawal, or sensory-seeking behaviors.

### 6. OFFERING BREAKS WHEN NEEDED

Encourage your child to take breaks from when they start to feel overwhelmed. Help them recognize their own signs of distress and offer support in finding ways to self-regulate.

### 7. USING TOOLS PROACTIVELY

Introduce sensory tools to your child proactively, before they become overwhelmed. Incorporate sensory activities into their daily routine that can carry over to the worship service.

### 8. MODELING RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Demonstrate relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, stretching, or using sensory tools like stress balls. Encourage your child to imitate these calming strategies when they need to unwind.

### 9. ENCOURAGING COMMUNICATION

Foster open communication with your child about their sensory experiences and emotions. Encourage them to express how they're feeling and what tools or activities help them feel better.

### 10. REINFORCING POSITIVE COPING STRATEGIES

Praise your child for using their sensory tools effectively and coping with sensory challenges. Reinforce positive behaviors and encourage them to continue practicing self-regulation techniques.

### 11. ADJUSTING STRATEGIES AS NEEDED

Be flexible and willing to adjust your approach based on your child's changing needs and preferences. Experiment with different sensory tools and techniques to find what works best for them.

### 12. SEEKING SUPPORT

If you're concerned about your child's sensory processing or emotional regulation, don't hesitate to reach out for support from the church staff or a volunteer. They can provide personalized strategies to help your child thrive. You're not alone, and there are resources available to help you.

# BREATHING EXERCISES GUIDE

**BELOW ARE SIMPLE YET EFFECTIVE DEEP BREATHING EXERCISES TO HELP YOU FIND PEACE AND CALMNESS AMIDST THE SENSORY STIMULATION OF WORSHIP.**



## 01 BELLY BREATHING

- Sit comfortably with your spine straight and shoulders relaxed.
- Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.
- Inhale deeply through your nose, allowing your abdomen to rise as you fill your lungs with air. Feel your hand on your abdomen move outward.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. Feel your hand on your abdomen move inward.
- Repeat this breathing pattern for several breaths, focusing on the rise and fall of your abdomen.

## 02 ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

- Sit comfortably with your spine straight and shoulders relaxed.
- Place your right thumb over your right nostril and your ring finger or pinky finger over your left nostril.
- Close your right nostril with your thumb and inhale deeply through your left nostril.
- Close your left nostril with your finger and exhale slowly through your right nostril.
- Inhale deeply through your right nostril, then close it with your thumb and exhale through your left nostril.
- Continue alternating nostrils with each breath, focusing on the sensation of air entering and leaving your body.

## 03 BOX BREATHING

- Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit.
- Close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose for a count of 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for a count of 7 seconds.
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 8 seconds, making a whooshing sound.
- Repeat this cycle for at least 4 breaths, allowing each exhale to release tension and stress.

## 04 GUIDED VISUALIZATION BREATHING

- Sit in a comfortable position, closing your eyes and taking a few deep breaths to relax.
- Imagine yourself in a peaceful and serene place, such as a beach, forest, or mountaintop.
- With each inhale, visualize yourself breathing in positive energy, calmness, and serenity.
- As you exhale, imagine releasing any tension, stress, or negative emotions from your body.
- Continue this guided visualization for several minutes, allowing yourself to immerse fully in the tranquility of your imagined surroundings.

## 04-12-8 BREATHING

- Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit.
- Close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose for a count of 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for a count of 7 seconds.
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 8 seconds, making a whooshing sound.
- Repeat this cycle for at least 4 breaths, allowing each exhale to release tension and stress.

*These breathing exercises can be incorporated into your worship routine to help you find inner peace and connection with the divine. Take a few moments during worship services to practice these techniques, and feel free to adjust them to suit your preferences and comfort level. Remember, deep breathing is a powerful tool for managing sensory sensitivities and enhancing your overall well-being.*

# PRAYER/ MEDITATION PROMPTS

THESE PROMPTS OFFER OPPORTUNITIES FOR  
INTROSPECTION, CONNECTION WITH CHRIST,  
AND MINDFULNESS PRACTICES TO ENHANCE  
YOUR SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE. HERE ARE SOME  
PROMPTS YOU CAN USE.



## 01 GRATITUDE REFLECTION

Begin by thanking God for three specific blessings in your life today. Reflect on how His grace and provision have manifested in your daily experiences.

## 03 SCRIPTURE MEDITATION

Choose a verse from the Bible that speaks to your heart. Read it slowly, allowing its wisdom to sink in. Ponder its meaning and how it applies to your life journey.

## 05 SILENT CONTEMPLATION

Spend a few moments in silent prayer, listening for the still, small voice of God. Allow His presence to envelop you, filling you with peace and assurance of His love.

## 07 BLESSING PRACTICE

Reflect on the blessings God has bestowed upon you and your loved ones. Offer prayers of thanksgiving for His faithfulness and grace, and ask for His blessing to be poured out abundantly on those in need.

## 02 BREATH AWARENESS

Close your eyes and focus on your breath as a gift from God. With each inhale, invite His Spirit to fill you with peace, and with each exhale, release any worries or tensions you may be carrying.

## 04 BODY SCAN MEDITATION

With each breath, invite the Holy Spirit to bring His healing presence to different parts of your body. Release any tension or pain into His care, trusting in His power to bring restoration.

## 06 NATURE CONNECTION

Visualize yourself walking alongside Jesus in the beauty of creation. Imagine the sights, sounds, and smells of nature as reminders of His majesty and care for His creation.

*These prayer and meditation prompts are intended to deepen your connection with God and enrich your worship experience. May they guide you into a deeper relationship with the Divine as you seek His presence and peace in your life.*

This resource guide was developed as a collaborative effort between Amanda Hiles Howard, Samford University Department of Psychology; Emily Snider Andrews, and Abbey Plant, Samford Center for Worship and the Arts; Nicole Gilbertson Wilke, CAFO Center for Applied Research on Vulnerable Children and Families; and René J. Zimny, Samford University Department of Art & Design. It was made possible through a Vital Worship, Vital Preaching Grant by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment, Inc.



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CALVIN INSTITUTE OF  
CHRISTIAN WORSHIP  
*for the study and renewal of worship*



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