

Autism as the Intense World Syndrome

The 'intense world syndrome' interpretation of autism suggests that the autistic person may perceive their surroundings as overwhelmingly intense (due to hyper-reactivity of sensory areas) and aversive and highly stressful (due to a hyper-reactive amygdala, which makes quick and powerful fear associations with usually neutral stimuli). In this view, autism is characterised by hyper-functionality as opposed to hypo-functionality as is often assumed.

We are not conscious of the limitations to our sensory systems (and our 'normal' perception) because we have grown up with them and do not know otherwise. In a way, 'normal' people have 'reduced awareness'. However, some autistic individuals are able to perceive much more than any average 'normal' person. This ability comes with a price – they are easily overloaded in 'normal' situations and their cognitive and language development follow a different route (and, as the consequences, lead to social interaction and social communication problems), and the world they know (construct) is very different from the conventional one.

The special abilities of autistic individuals to sense the environment are not limited to hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli. As most autistic individuals' senses work in 'hyper', and feelings start as sensations (either conscious or unconscious), it is no wonder that many people with autism are emotionally hypersensitive

Though the manifestations of sensory perceptual differences vary in different people (no two autistic individuals have the exactly same patterns of sensory perceptual experiences) or even the same person at different ages), it is possible to establish the common features, and identify compensatory strategies and adaptations. Most commonly reported perceptual phenomena will be discussed.