

# JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

## Sounds and Smells

One of the signs of being autistic is that you have sensory differences with the way you take in the world. You might struggle or get overwhelmed with certain sounds or smells, for example. However, that doesn't just apply to autistic people. It is thought that 10% of the general population has hyperosmia (*a superior sense of smell*), and 20% of people have misophonia (*intense reactions to specific sounds*).

Many of my clients share difficulties they have with sensory input, and it can be severely disabling for some of them.

Here are tips and strategies that they've shared, in case any of these ideas help you.

### SOUNDS: MISOPHONIA

I have a theory that you can tell how long someone has known they are autistic by how many different devices they have for their ears. I have noise cancelling headphones when I'm on public transport, Loop Engage earbuds when I need to hear someone speak but want lower background noise, and silicone earbuds for sleeping.

*Loop Engage* earbuds are popular with the autistic community. If you hear someone talking about their "loops" this is what they mean:

<https://www.loopearplugs.com/products/engage> - their plugs reduce background noise and the little ring picks up conversations.

Other manufacturers are available e.g. *Calmer* by Flare Audio.

Some people say they don't like earplugs because they alter the volume of your own voice in your head, so you're not sure how loud you should be speaking. One way around this is to just wear one earbud.

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One note of caution, if noises are louder because you have hyperacusis then wearing earplugs that dull sound can make your symptoms worse. A hearing specialist may give you earplugs that produce white noise instead. (There's more information about hyperacusis at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hyperacusis/> )

Other forms of coping with loud noise:

- asking if you can move to a quieter location
- noise cancelling headphones
- silicone earplugs (*squish flat into your ear, I love these at night*)
- listening to soundscapes
- white noise generators. One client goes to sleep with the sound of waves or rainfall. Another says they would sleep with the vacuum cleaner running if they could.

Another option is bone conducting headphones, which bypass the ear canal.

One client recommended the *"Magicteam Sleep Sound White Noise Machine with 40 Natural Soothing Sounds"*, including hairdryer and vacuum cleaner sounds: [https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/aw/d/B07RQWQBXY?ref=ppx\\_pop\\_mob\\_b\\_asin\\_title&th=1](https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/aw/d/B07RQWQBXY?ref=ppx_pop_mob_b_asin_title&th=1)

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**MISOPHONIA** is being researched by Dr Jane Gregory:  
<https://soundlikemisophonia.com/about>

Dr Jane has published a book "*Sounds Like Misophonia: How to stop small noises from causing extreme reactions*": <https://soundlikemisophonia.com/book>

Please don't worry if you're autistic and you like loud noises. Being autistic doesn't mean that we all want the same thing. What we usually have in common is a "*spiky sensory profile*", so we can take a great deal of something we want – and have no tolerance to things that we don't want.

For example, a large number of autistic people are into heavy metal music. When I asked someone how they could put up with that, they replied that being into heavy metal was a very autistic thing. They said for them:

- Going to gigs every week was part of their routine
- Head banging was their stim
- The mosh pit had rules, which they understood
- They felt part of a community which had a visual language, so they weren't missing invisible social cues
- Gigs were too loud for anyone to use speech
- The wall of sound blasted all the bad feelings out of their body

I'm still not into heavy metal music, but having heard that explanation I can completely see that it's an autistic thing to do.

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## SMELLS: HYPEROSMIA

Hyperosmia can be a lifelong condition, but it can also be caused by pregnancy, some medical conditions (*e.g. Lyme disease*) and some medications. It is worth talking to a doctor in case this is something that could be treated, helped by change in medication, or is a sign that something else is going on. (<https://www.london-ent.co.uk/news/hyperosmia-what-is-it-and-what-causes-it/> )

Tips from clients where acute smell is an issue, but not a sign of anything else:

- Using air purifiers and improving ventilation at home.
- Using chewing gum or mints to disguise smells when you're out.
- Wearing a mask.
- Using a menthol rub or essential oils near your nose or inside a mask. (*It's not recommended to put any of these inside your nose.*)
- Using a salt water rinse system to clean sinuses regularly.

From the webpage *What Do You Do If You're Extra Sensitive to Smells?*  
(<https://highlysensitiverefuge.com/sensitive-to-smells-smangry/>)

- I do my shopping as early in the morning as possible, when fewer people are around. Fewer people = less pungency.
- In the car, I keep my windows rolled up and the recirculation on.
- Whenever I clean or paint, I wear a dust mask to help filter out smells. I also prefer unscented or natural cleaning products, if I can find them.
- I always have a clean handkerchief in my pocket, in case I have to share space with an unpleasant smell for a while. It helps if I unfold the handkerchief and breathe into it to filter out the bad scent.

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- When a scent is already affecting you many fragrance-sensitive people recommend using a simple saline nasal spray — just saline water, no harsh chemicals, no scent — that you can carry with you. A spritz into each nostril (*and then blowing it out*) helps clean out a smell and its effects, including many allergens, which can help head off migraines and other reactions.

Some people put their extra sensitive nose to work. Jobs that require a good sense of smell include perfumer, food scientist, aroma therapist, sommelier, odour tester and chocolatier. (From <https://www.totaljobs.com/advice/jobs-that-require-a-good-sense-of-smell> )

Smells don't have to be all bad. As with sounds, autistic people often can't get enough of a sensory input that we like, and we have no tolerance for a sensory input that we don't like.

One client loves the smell of coal fires and steam trains. They found scents that matched what they were looking for at <https://aromaprime.com/> and <https://www.freshskin.co.uk/product/steam-train-fragrance-oil/>

I found a room spray that I liked at <https://truegrace.co.uk/> - and I now take this with me when I stay away from home. I find that a familiar scent that I do like helps me adjust to the new location, and I also get to sleep quicker when I use it.

I hope that helps. Please send me a message if there are other suggestions you'd like me to add.

Best wishes,  
John Pendal

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