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# Preparing for the Holidays: Thanksgiving

Contributed by Kristi Jordan



As we prepare for Thanksgiving, it is important to minimize the holiday stressors, in order to maximize our ability to be thankful. To do this, we prepare individuals for the change in routine and schedule, for sensory challenges, and for communication needs.

## Sensory Challenges

After we have adequately prepared for the change in routine, we must recognize sensory challenges that exist surrounding Thanksgiving and Thanksgiving weekend.

Sensory challenges face both those who are hypersensitive and those who are hyposensitive to sensory input in the environment. Knowing how an individual responds to the types of sensory input is important. Touch, taste, sight, smell, sound, movement, and pressure input may be different on Thanksgiving weekend than it is on other routine days of the year and can impact arousal, attention, emotions, and behavior.

Carefully consider each sensory system and prepare individuals for these changes. For example:



## Touch/Tactile

For individuals who are hypersensitive to touch, you may wish to prime and prepare them for crowds or activities that may involve touch. More importantly, you may wish to prepare individuals in your family and social circle to respect and understand the individual's needs regarding touch. A well-intentioned hug or kiss may not be a pleasant experience for an individual who is sensitive. Busy shopping malls and pre-Christmas sales may not be ideal for these individuals, as the crowds may be overwhelming. Having a space to "get away" when overwhelmed is a good idea. Individuals that are hyposensitive to touch may seek out extra

opportunities to touch items or people. Others may need to understand this behavior prior to the event or activity. You may also wish to review a narrative with the individual about personal space or touch, in general, so that they understand the social expectations in a given situation. Another option may be to pack some tactile sensory activities to provide needed touch input during the potentially stressful holiday events. Also consider touch needs when picking out a special holiday outfit, remembering to ensure comfort above other needs. Choosing layers may help the individual regulate temperature and stay comfortable throughout the day.



### Taste/Oral

For individuals who are hypersensitive to taste, it may be a good idea to plan some menu items accordingly and to pack special food items. Having some control and choice in food and menu may help reduce unnecessary stress and anxiety. Preparing family members for this individual need may also be helpful to avoid uncomfortable moments or stress because the individual isn't eating foods traditionally associated with Thanksgiving or with a the family events. For those who are hyposensitive to taste and who seek out extreme flavors, having some favorite flavors or sauces available may help them cope with the traditional holiday flavors.



### Smell/Olfactory

For individuals who are hypersensitive to smell, it is important to understand how overwhelming that the scents of meal preparation, candles, and other holiday items can be. Pine, cinnamon, pumpkin spices, and cloves are strong scents that overpower the sensitive nose of individuals who have difficulty processing smells without becoming anxious or upset. Avoid stores that burn candles, have extra smells or perfumes inside around the holidays. Also, prepare family and friends and gently request that perfumes and colognes be kept to a minimum around the individual. For individuals who are hyposensitive to smell, the holidays can be very exciting. Many strong scents and flavors are within reach. Monitor for safety and keep strong items out of reach if burns or ingestion could be an issue.



### Sound/Auditory:

There are so many sounds related to Thanksgiving and the holidays. Be mindful about the noise level in environments and provide accommodations for hypersensitive individuals, such as headphones or earplugs or an iPod if noisy environments are anticipated. Provide a quiet space for

calming, whenever possible. Some individuals may also become overly excited by sounds and auditory input and may become disorganized in those environments, even if they seek out that input.



### Movement/Vestibular

Provide accommodations for those who need extra movement, such as by bringing their favorite cushion for the dinner table or by allowing them opportunities for movement breaks, such as a family walk. For movement challenges related to the holiday events, plan ahead for activities or outings that may be overwhelming, such as family football or escalators at the shopping mall and consider alternatives.



### Pressure/Proprioception

For those who need additional pressure, it is good to provide opportunities for this calming input throughout the day to reduce anxiety. Carrying groceries or shopping bags, pushing a cart, or helping with chores, such as wiping counters or dinner tables can provide this input. It may also be good to take play and activity breaks several times a day when holiday events occur.

It is important to consider sensory needs and the effect of sensory on arousal, processing, and behavior when planning events. If you are aware of the impact of sensory on alertness, organization of behavior, and emotional outcomes in an individual, it helps you to respond accordingly.