

THE ABCS

OF MINIMIZING SENSORY OVERLOAD

Use the following A-B-C strategy to minimize sensory overload and design solutions that reduce the negative impacts of virtual exhaustion or social isolation.



A SSES YOUR LEARNERS



Survey Learners

The first component to minimize the impact of sensory overload is to assess your learners for the associated risk factors. You can use a combination of closed-ended, scaled, and open-ended questions to gauge your learners and their environments. Consider the following questions to ask your learners:

QUESTION EXAMPLES		
CLOSED-ENDED	SCALED (I.E., LIKERT SCALE)	OPEN-ENDED
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, how many hours do you spend in front of a screen each day? On average, how many hours do you spend on solitary tasks each day? Do you take scheduled breaks throughout your day? 	<p>On a scale from 1-5 (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), respond to the following statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I often get tired very quickly. I often have problems thinking clearly. I often have trouble sleeping. I often find myself fidgeting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you could change anything in your current environment, what would it be? How can we make training more accessible for you?

Recognize Sensory Overload

Sometimes you're unable to assess risk for sensory overload before it begins. Knowing the common symptoms of sensory overload will allow you to identify existing cases of sensory overload among your learners. The sooner you identify existing cases of sensory overload, the sooner you can provide a solution. Common symptoms of sensory overload include:

- Extreme irritability
- Restlessness and discomfort
- Difficulty in maintaining mental focus
- Memory loss
- Sensitivity to light or difficulty focusing your eyes
- Urge to cover your ears or shield your eyes from sensory input
- Higher levels than usual of sensitivity to textures, fabrics, clothing tags, or other things that may rub against skin
- Feeling overly excited or "wound up" and/or difficulty sleeping
- Stress, fear, or anxiety about your surroundings



CREATE A **B**LENDED SOLUTION



Next, you can create a solution that includes a blend of virtual and non-virtual elements. Here are several examples of those learning elements that you can design into your blend:

Shared Team Goals

Create teams of learners who work collaboratively to complete a series of learning goals. The team can meet either virtually or in person, at a time and place convenient to them, and complete their assigned project. Provide opportunities for individual and group assessment, as well as consultation sessions with course moderators to discuss progress and explore questions.

Flipped Classroom

Provide some learning materials, such as podcasts, slides, games, or videos in advance of a facilitator-led virtual or in-person event.

Experiential Opportunities

Provide learners with opportunities to experience “learning in the real world.” For example, instead of having learners read a competitive comparison, ask them to visit a competitor for a “secret shop” (or, call to learn more in a socially distanced environment!) and report their findings.

CRAFT A PLAN TO **C**OMMUNICATE



The third component to minimizing the impact of sensory overload is to communicate the risk factors and impact of sensory overload to your learners. Here is a recommended communication strategy:

- Ask learners for communication preferences
- Set expectations early and be consistent in messaging
- Use diagrams and visuals to explain options, timelines, or processes
- Vary communication methods including email, text, personal calls, virtual calls, or daily huddles
- Build social options, such as lunch-and-learns, video coffee sessions, or virtual water cooler discussions into your communication plan
- Make it fun: include trivia, puzzles, or games

BONUS TIPS

Below are additional tips for reducing sensory overload through small changes to the learners' work environment:

- Prompt learners to turn down the brightness on their devices
- Keep training sessions shorter and allow for at least five minutes between sessions (i.e., schedule training sessions for 55 minutes instead of 60 minutes)
- Promote noise-canceling headphones to block out auditory stimuli or any other distracting sounds
- Build in frequent breaks to the training
- Encourage learners to use fidget toys
- Remind learners to drink their water and eat snacks throughout the session (crunchy snacks may have a calming effect)