MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #377

Why the World Feels Too Loud: ADHD and Sensory Processing

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Why does a humming refrigerator or a humid afternoon feel like a physical assault to some, while others barely notice? In this episode, Herman and Corn dive deep into the world of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) and its profound connection to ADHD and autism. Inspired by a listener’s journey with adult diagnosis, the duo explores the biological "software" behind sensory gating, the "Ferrari engine with bicycle brakes" phenomenon in gifted individuals, and why the sensory world is the foundation of the neurodivergent experience. Whether you're navigating your own sensory sensitivities or want to understand the science of the "eighth sense," this conversation offers a validating look at why the world often feels too loud, too bright, and too fast.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

"I wanted to talk today about neurodivergence and labels. I've mentioned being diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, and one of the labels I've encountered in my search for who I am is sensory processing disorder (SPD). I notice it most acutely when I'm outside of my sensory comfort zone, like when I'm traveling and have less control over the environment. For example, while working remotely in Connecticut during a humid summer, I realized how finicky my sensory world is. Noise, smells, or even physical discomfort like bloating can easily pull my focus. I recently picked up a book called *Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight* by Sharon Heller. She discusses how gifted people often live with intensity and the correlations between autism and ADHD, which are sometimes thought of as sibling conditions. I've also read that people who are creative or have higher IQs often have sound sensitivity. I'd love to discuss sensory processing disorder and the commonalities that exist between ADHD and autism. Why do we see the sensory world crop up so commonly in different conditions that are collectively bucketed into forms of neurodivergence?"

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Imagine you are trying to have a conversation in a crowded restaurant. For most people, the brain does this incredible thing where it just filters out the clinking of silverware, the hum of the air conditioner, and the chatter at the next table, allowing you to focus entirely on the person in front of you. This is what neuroscientists call the **cocktail party effect**. But for some of us, that filter is more like a sieve with giant holes in it. Every sound, every smell, every stray flicker of a light bulb comes rushing in at the same volume. It is not just a distraction; it is a physical assault on the senses. It is exhausting, right?

Herman

Oh, absolutely. It is like being a radio tuned to five stations at once, with the static turned up to eleven. I am Herman Poppleberry, and today we are diving into a topic that hits very close to home for a lot of people in our community. Our housemate Daniel sent us a fascinating prompt about this. He has been exploring his own journey with neurodivergence, specifically how an adult diagnosis of **attention deficit hyperactivity disorder**, or **ADHD**, led him to discover the world of **sensory processing disorder**, or **SPD**. It is a journey many adults are taking right now, especially as we get better at identifying these traits later in life.

Corn

Yeah, Daniel was talking about how he noticed it most when he was working remotely in Connecticut during a particularly humid summer. He mentioned how the physical discomfort of the humidity, combined with noises and even things like bloating, would just completely derail his focus. It is that feeling of being out of your **sensory comfort zone**. He also brought up a book called *Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight* by Sharon Heller, which explores these intensities in gifted and neurodivergent people. It is a classic in the field, and it really speaks to that feeling of being overstimulated by a world that was not built for your specific wiring.

Herman

It is such a great title because it captures the visceral nature of the experience. We often talk about ADHD or autism in terms of behavior or social interaction, but the **sensory side** is really the foundation of how these individuals experience the world. Today, we want to look at why these conditions are so often bucketed together and why the sensory world seems to be the common denominator across so many forms of neurodivergence. According to ongoing research from the **Star Institute**, sensory processing is not just a side effect; it is often the core mechanism of the neurodivergent experience[1].

Corn

I think a good place to start, Herman, is defining what we actually mean by **sensory processing disorder**. Because as Daniel pointed out, it is not about the organs themselves. His hearing is fine, his sense of smell is fine. So, if the hardware is working, what is happening with the software?

Herman

That is a perfect analogy. The issue is not the sensors; it is the integration. In a neurotypical brain, there is a process called **sensory gating**. Think of the **thalamus** as the gatekeeper of the brain. Specifically, there is a region called the **thalamic reticular nucleus**, or **TRN**. Its job is to decide which signals are important enough to send up to the cortex for conscious processing and which ones can be ignored. In someone with SPD, that gatekeeper is either asleep on the job or just completely overwhelmed. Studies indicate differences in thalamic sensory gating in neurodivergent brains, such as altered connectivity[2].

Corn

So, instead of the brain saying, okay, that humming fridge is irrelevant, it treats the fridge hum with the same urgency as someone calling your name. It is like the brain has lost its ability to prioritize.

Herman

Exactly. And it goes both ways. Sharon Heller talks about the **sensory integration triad**: touch, movement, and body awareness. These are the foundational senses that develop before sight or hearing. You can have **sensory over-responsivity**, where things are too loud or too bright, but you can also have under-responsivity, where you might not notice pain or you need intense movement to feel grounded. Then there is **sensory seeking**, where the brain is starving for input. But what Daniel is describing, especially with the humidity and the noise, is that classic over-responsivity, or **sensory defensiveness**. It is a failure of the brain to habituate to repetitive stimuli.

Corn

I find it interesting that Daniel mentioned ADHD and autism as **sibling conditions**. We see a massive amount of overlap here. Research indicates **40-60%** of children with ADHD also have significant sensory processing challenges. And for autistic individuals, that number can be as high as **90%**[3]. Why are these two conditions so inextricably linked to the sensory experience?

Herman

It comes down to how the brain is wired. In both ADHD and autism, we see differences in the **white matter tracts**, which are basically the long-distance cables of the brain. Specifically, there is often reduced connectivity in the areas responsible for integrating information from different senses. If the visual system and the auditory system are not talking to each other efficiently, the brain cannot create a coherent picture of the environment. It stays fragmented. Recent studies highlight sensory integration challenges in camouflaging adults[4].

Corn

And that fragmentation leads to that feeling of intensity, doesn't it? If the world feels like a series of disconnected, high-intensity events, your nervous system is going to be in a constant state of high alert. You are essentially living in a permanent state of fight or flight.

Herman

Precisely. This connects to what Sharon Heller talks about. She uses the term **sensory defensiveness**. When your brain cannot filter, it perceives the world as a threat. That humidity Daniel felt in Connecticut? To a neurotypical brain, it is a minor annoyance. To a sensory-defensive brain, it is a constant, physical intrusion. The skin is the boundary between the self and the world, and it is covered in **five million nerve endings**. When you are sensory defensive, the light touch of humid air can feel like you are being smothered by a wet blanket. You cannot focus on a spreadsheet when your body thinks it is under attack.

Corn

I want to touch on the point Daniel made about **giftedness** and IQ. He mentioned reading that creative people or those with higher IQs often have higher sound sensitivity. This feels like a bit of a double-edged sword. You have this high-powered engine of a brain, but it is taking in so much data that it risks overheating.

Herman

There is actually some fascinating research on this. There is a concept called **latent inhibition**. It is the subconscious capacity to ignore stimuli that have been experienced as irrelevant. People who are highly creative often have low latent inhibition. They do not filter out the background noise because their brains are looking for patterns everywhere. That stray sound might be the missing piece of a creative puzzle, so the brain keeps the door open. Research links low latent inhibition to creativity[5].

Corn

So, the very thing that makes someone a brilliant problem solver or a creative artist is the same thing that makes them want to climb a wall when someone is chewing gum in the next room? It is like having a **super-sensor** that you cannot turn off.

Herman

Sadly, yes. It is often described as having a **Ferrari engine with bicycle brakes**. You have the cognitive power to process complex ideas, but you lack the inhibitory control to shut out the world. There is also the work of **Kazimierz Dabrowski**, a Polish psychologist who talked about **overexcitabilities** in gifted individuals. He identified five areas: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational, and emotional. He argued that these intensities are not just symptoms but are actually the raw material for advanced personality development. He called them **superstimulabilities**. It is a beautiful way to reframe a struggle as a potential strength.

Corn

That is an empowering way to look at it, but it does not make the humidity any less sticky. Daniel mentioned something else that I think is really important: **interoception**. He talked about how bloating or physical discomfort pulls his focus. We usually think of the five senses, but interoception is that internal sense of what is happening inside your body.

Herman

Interoception is sometimes called the **eighth sense**, and it is huge in the neurodivergent community. Many people with ADHD or autism have a very distorted sense of their internal state. They might not realize they are hungry until they are starving, or they might feel internal sensations with extreme intensity. Research links interoception to emotional regulation in neurodivergence[6].

Corn

It makes sense why traveling is such a trigger for this. When you are at home, you have curated your environment. You know the smells, you control the lights, you have your specific chair. But when you travel, everything is new. The air feels different, the water tastes different, the ambient noise is unpredictable. You lose your sensory safety net.

Herman

And for someone with ADHD, travel already taxes the executive functions. You are planning routes, managing schedules, and navigating new spaces. When you add a sensory onslaught on top of that, the brain simply runs out of bandwidth. This is why we see so many people in the neurodivergent community talking about the need for **sensory diets** or sensory regulation. In **2026**, more travel companies and hotels are beginning to offer **sensory-friendly options**, which is a huge step forward[7].

Corn

Let's talk about those labels for a second. Daniel mentioned how he has encountered all these different terms like ADHD, autism, and SPD. Sometimes it feels like we are just slicing the same pie into different shapes. Do you think the labels are helpful, or are they becoming too fragmented?

Herman

That is a great question, and there is a lot of debate about it. On one hand, labels can be incredibly validating. For Daniel, discovering that his struggle with noise and heat has a name, sensory processing disorder, means he is not just being difficult or dramatic. It is a biological reality. It gives him a framework to look for solutions. On the other hand, the medical model tends to see these as separate disorders, whereas many advocates prefer the umbrella of neurodivergence. We are moving toward a model of **sensory phenotypes**, where we look at the specific way a person processes information rather than just giving them a one-word label.

Corn

Right, because the underlying mechanism, that difficulty with neural integration and filtering, seems to be the common thread. Whether it manifests as a struggle with focus in ADHD or a struggle with social cues in autism, the **sensory piece** is often the bedrock. It is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

Herman

Exactly. There is actually a move toward seeing these conditions as a spectrum of connectivity. Some people have more local connectivity, which can lead to intense focus on details, while others have more long-distance connectivity. Neurodivergence is really just a way of saying that your brain's wiring diagram is different from the statistical norm. Research advocates focusing on sensory-movement underpinnings in neurodivergence[8].

Corn

I wonder if we could dig into some specific examples of how this shows up in daily life. Daniel mentioned sound sensitivity, which is a big one. But there is also **proprioception**, right? The sense of where your body is in space.

Herman

Yes, **proprioception** is fascinating. If you have ever seen someone who seems a bit clumsy, who bumps into doorframes or trips over their own feet, that might be a proprioceptive issue. Their brain isn't getting clear feedback from the muscles and joints about where they are. This is why many neurodivergent people love **weighted blankets** or tight clothing. It provides that deep pressure input that tells the brain, okay, this is where I end and the world begins. It is a way of grounding the nervous system when the external world feels too chaotic.

Corn

It is like the brain is constantly asking for a status update from the body and getting a **four zero four error**. So, it seeks out intense input to fill the gap. That explains why some people need to move or fidget just to feel like they are present in their own skin.

Herman

Precisely. And then you have the visual side. It is not just about brightness. It can be about **visual clutter**. A messy room can be physically painful for someone with sensory over-responsivity. Their brain is trying to process every single object in the room with the same priority. It is like trying to read a book while someone is flashing a strobe light in your face. In **2026**, more **workplace designs** are prioritizing visual simplicity to help with this, but for many, it is still a daily struggle.

Corn

This really reframes the idea of focus. We often think of focus as a lack of willpower, but if you have SPD, you are using all your willpower just to exist in a loud, bright room. You have nothing left for the actual task at hand. You are essentially running a marathon just to sit at your desk.

Herman

That is the core of the struggle. It is the **hidden tax of neurodivergence**. A neurotypical person might spend two percent of their energy filtering the environment. A person with SPD might spend **forty percent**. By the time they even start their work, they are already halfway to burnout. This is why accommodations like **noise-canceling headphones** or flexible hours are not just perks; they are essential tools for leveling the playing field.

Corn

So, what can people do? Daniel mentioned being in Connecticut and feeling the humidity. If you are in that situation, and you realize your sensory world is finicky, what are the practical takeaways? How do you manage a world that feels like it is constantly shouting at you?

Herman

The first step is what Daniel is already doing: **awareness**. Once you realize it is a sensory issue, you can stop blaming yourself for being lazy or unfocused. Then, you look at **environmental modification**. If humidity is the trigger, you need an air conditioner or a dehumidifier. If noise is the trigger, you use noise-canceling headphones. There are some great products out now, like **Loop earplugs** or **Flare Calmer**, that filter out specific frequencies without blocking everything out. It sounds simple, but many people feel they have to tough it out.

Corn

I think there is a lot of social pressure to be resilient, isn't there? We are told to just ignore it or get over it. But if your brain is physically incapable of ignoring it, that advice is useless. It is like telling a person with a broken leg to just walk it off.

Herman

It is worse than useless; it is damaging. It leads to **sensory overload** and eventually a meltdown or a shutdown. A better approach is the **sensory diet** I mentioned earlier. This is a personalized plan of sensory activities that help a person stay calm and organized throughout the day. For some, that might mean taking a five-minute break every hour to sit in a dark room. For others, it might mean using a fidget toy or taking a brisk walk to get some **proprioceptive input**. It is about proactive regulation rather than reactive damage control.

Corn

And what about the creative side? If you are a gifted person with high intensity, how do you protect that **creative spark** while managing the sensory overwhelm? How do you keep the Ferrari engine running without burning out the brakes?

Herman

You have to build a fortress for your focus. Many of the most successful creative minds in history were notoriously finicky about their environments. **Marcel Proust** lined his bedroom with cork to keep out the noise. **Charles Darwin** had a very specific, quiet routine. They understood that their gift was tied to their sensitivity, so they protected that sensitivity at all costs. In our modern world, that might mean setting strict boundaries on digital notifications or creating a dedicated **sensory-safe space** in your home.

Corn

It is about honoring the sensitivity rather than fighting it. If you have that high sound sensitivity, maybe you are meant to be a musician or an editor. But you can't do that if you are constantly bombarded by the sounds of a construction site next door. You have to curate your life to match your wiring.

Herman

Exactly. We also need to talk about the sibling conditions again. One of the reasons we see ADHD and autism together so much is that they often share a common **genetic architecture**. Studies confirm high genetic overlap between ADHD and autism. This is why the sensory piece is such a powerful diagnostic tool. It can often point to the underlying neurotype before the behavioral symptoms even become clear.

Corn

That makes the whole debate about labels feel even more like we are just looking at different facets of the same diamond. Whether you call it ADHD with sensory issues or autism with high cognitive function, the lived experience is remarkably similar. It is all part of the same beautiful, complex spectrum of human **neurodiversity**.

Herman

It really is. And as we understand more about the neurobiology, I think we will see the diagnostic categories shift. We might start diagnosing based on **sensory profiles** rather than just behavioral checklists. Imagine going to a doctor and getting a report that says, your auditory filtering is in the bottom tenth percentile, but your visual pattern recognition is in the top ninety-ninth. That would be so much more useful than just a one-word label. It would allow for truly personalized support.

Corn

That would be a game-changer. It would allow for much more targeted support. Instead of a general medication for ADHD, you might get a specific intervention for your auditory gating issues. We are already seeing some of this with things like **tinted lenses** for visual stress or specialized earplugs that filter out background noise while keeping speech clear. Technology is starting to catch up with the needs of the neurodivergent community.

Herman

We are also seeing a shift in how we view movement. For a long time, fidgeting was seen as a problem to be fixed. But now we know that for many neurodivergent people, movement is a way of regulating the **vestibular system**. It is the conductor of the sensory orchestra. If your vestibular system is out of whack, everything else feels precarious. This is why many kids with sensory issues love to swing or spin. They are trying to jump-start that vestibular system. For adults, this can show up as a need to pace while on the phone or a preference for rocking chairs.

Corn

It is amazing how all these things are connected. You have the internal organs, the muscles, the balance system, and the external senses, all trying to talk to each other through a brain that is sometimes a bit of a chaotic switchboard. It is a miracle that it works as well as it does for most of us!

Herman

It really is! But for the Daniels of the world, it is a constant act of navigation. I think the most important thing for anyone listening who identifies with this is to realize that your intensity is not a defect. It is a characteristic. It is part of the package that likely includes your creativity, your empathy, and your deep thinking. You don't get the high-resolution world without the occasionally overwhelming brightness. It is a package deal.

Corn

I love that. It is a **package deal**. You don't get the Ferrari engine without the high fuel consumption. As our understanding of neurodiversity grows, I hope the world becomes more accommodating. We are already seeing **quiet hours** in supermarkets and sensory-friendly performances in theaters. These aren't just for kids; they are for everyone who finds the modern world a bit too loud and too bright.

Herman

And it benefits everyone, really. Who doesn't want a slightly quieter, less cluttered world? We didn't evolve in a world with fluorescent lights, constant digital pings, and city-wide background hums. In a way, maybe the neurodivergent brain is just the **canary in the coal mine** for a world that has become sensory-toxic for everyone. We are all on a sensory spectrum. Some of us just have a narrower band of comfort than others.

Corn

That is a profound point, Herman. We are all navigating this **sensory soup** together. Well, this has been a deep dive. We covered everything from the thalamus to the humidity in Connecticut. I hope this gives Daniel and our other listeners some food for thought. It is a complex topic, but understanding the why behind the intensity can be so empowering.

Herman

It really is. And if you are interested in exploring this further, I highly recommend the book Daniel mentioned, *Too Loud, Too Bright, Too Fast, Too Tight* by Sharon Heller. It is a fantastic resource for understanding sensory defensiveness. There is also a lot of great new research coming out of the Star Institute and other neurodiversity-affirming organizations right now.

Corn

Definitely. We may have talked about something similar before, so if you want to dig deeper into our thoughts on neurobiology, check out myweirdprompts dot com to search our archive. We have covered a lot of ground over **hundreds of episodes**[4]. It is a huge library at this point.

Herman

Yeah, it is a wealth of information. And hey, if you are enjoying the show, we would really appreciate a quick review on your podcast app or on Spotify. It genuinely helps other people who are looking for these kinds of deep-dive conversations to find us. We love hearing from you all, and your support keeps this collaboration going.

Corn

It really does. We love this community. Well, I think that is a wrap for today's episode of My Weird Prompts. Thanks to Daniel for the great prompt. It is always a pleasure to explore these ideas with you, Herman.

Herman

Likewise, Corn. And thank you all for listening. You can find us on Spotify and at our website, myweirdprompts dot com. Until next time, stay curious and keep exploring those intensities.

Corn

Take care, everyone. Bye!