

Building Sensory-Friendly Work Environments

TL;DR · QUICK SUMMARY

- Office environments are often designed around one “typical” sensory tolerance — bright lights, open-plan noise, constant visual activity.
- Small, low-cost changes can make a real difference to people who find these environments genuinely draining.

A Note Before You Read On

This resource offers general guidance and reflects common experience, not professional, legal, medical or financial advice. It is not a substitute for employment law, HR policy, occupational health guidance, or individual professional assessment. Every person’s experience of neurodivergence is different, so please adapt anything here to your own situation. The Uniquely Wired Network does not accept liability for decisions, actions or outcomes arising from the use of this material. If you need advice specific to your circumstances, please consult a qualified professional (e.g. HR, legal, medical, or financial advisor).

Why This Matters

Sensory overwhelm isn’t a preference issue — for many neurodivergent people, it has a real, cumulative cost on energy and focus.

An environment that drains someone by 2pm every day affects their output, however capable they are.

Most sensory adjustments are low-cost and improve the environment for everyone, not just ND staff.

What This Might Look Like

- Someone consistently choosing to work from a meeting room or quiet corner rather than their desk.

- A team member wearing headphones all day, even without music playing.
- Someone who seems noticeably more tired or less focused in the open-plan office than during remote days.
- A colleague who asks for lights to be dimmed or blinds adjusted repeatedly.

What You Can Do

1. Offer quiet or low-stimulation spaces.

- Designate at least one quiet zone or bookable quiet room away from open-plan noise.
- Allow desk moves to lower-traffic areas where practical.

2. Give control over immediate sensory input.

- Allow noise-cancelling headphones as standard, not as a special request.
- Allow flexibility on lighting — desk lamps instead of overhead lighting where possible.

3. Reduce unnecessary sensory load in shared spaces.

- Avoid unnecessary background music or TVs in open work areas.
- Give advance notice of loud or disruptive office events (renovations, fire alarm tests, large gatherings).

Helpful Phrases You Can Borrow

Offering a sensory adjustment proactively:

"If the open-plan noise ever gets too much, feel free to use the quiet room, or headphones are totally fine at your desk."

Responding to a specific request:

"Of course — let's move your desk somewhere quieter and see how that feels after a couple of weeks."

Quick Tips

- Sensory overwhelm has a real cumulative energy cost, not just momentary discomfort.
- Quiet spaces and headphones should be standard options, not special favours.
- Give advance warning of loud or disruptive events where possible.
- Most sensory adjustments cost little and help beyond just ND staff.
- Lighting control is a simple, often-overlooked adjustment.
- Revisit sensory adjustments if the office layout or environment changes.

Want to Know More?

- See our companion guide: “Examples by Role Type” for role-specific environmental needs.
- See “Flexible Working” for remote or hybrid options that reduce sensory load.
- Speak with occupational health for a formal workplace needs assessment if needed.

Before You Go

A calmer sensory environment tends to benefit everyone’s focus, not just those who ask for it.

Small changes here are genuinely low-cost, high-impact adjustments.