

A GENTLE STARTER GUIDE

noise sensitivity guide



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WHY WE EXIST

Why hushri exists

hushri was born from lived experience, by someone for whom the sounds most people filter out have always occupied the foreground.

For me, and for the people closest to me, everyday sounds never fade into the background. The rumble of traffic, the proximity of neighbours, building works, the constant hum of machinery: these do not recede. They occupy the foreground of consciousness, demand constant attention, and deplete the kind of nervous system energy that most people never have to think about. Ordinary days become genuinely exhausting.

I looked for a resource that treated this experience as real, valid, and worth addressing clearly. I could not find one that felt like it was made by someone who understood it from the inside. So hushri is that resource. It exists for anyone who finds the world too loud, whether or not they have a diagnosis, whether they are autistic, ADHD, highly sensitive, living in a high-stimulus environment, or simply in need of a quieter world. No label is required, and no explanation is owed.

hushri is an online home, built from lived experience, on the belief that the problem is never the person. The world is loud. hushri exists to help you navigate it.

About the author

This guide is written by Nadine Benjamin BA (Hons), ACIM, founder of hushri and an associate member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, working towards Chartered Marketer status. hushri's content brings together lived experience of noise sensitivity with a professional commitment to accuracy, plain English, and accessible design. Every guide is attributed, and every factual claim is referenced.

WELCOME

Welcome, and what to expect

If certain sounds make daily life harder than it seems to be for everyone else, you are in the right place. And you are very welcome here.

hushri is a website and YouTube channel for people who find the world too loud. We make clear, friendly content about noise sensitivity and sensory overload, the kind we wished existed when we were first making sense of our own. This guide is a good place to start.

You will find plain explanations rather than clinical language, and useful ideas that fit around real life rather than assuming you can control everything around you. Nothing here is a test, and nothing is compulsory. Read it in whatever order feels right.

What's inside:

- Whether this describes you, and what noise sensitivity is, and is not.
- Why it happens, where you might sit on the spectrum, and the terms you may hear.
- Common triggers, early warning signs, and what to do in the moment.
- Tools organised by how much energy you have, and how to recover afterwards.
- How to communicate your needs, and a section for families and children.
- Real-life examples, a one-page summary, a workbook, and where to go next.

RECOGNISING IT

Could this be you?

There is no test for noise sensitivity, and you do not need a diagnosis for your experience to be real. Still, many people recognise themselves in statements like these. Tick any that feel familiar.

- ☐ Everyday sounds others ignore, such as a fan or distant traffic, can feel impossible to tune out.
- ☐ You notice sounds before other people do, or notice sounds others do not seem to register at all.
- ☐ Busy places like cafes, shops, or open-plan offices leave you drained more quickly than they seem to drain others.
- ☐ You feel exhausted after being in busy or noisy environments, even ones you enjoyed.
- ☐ Sudden or unexpected sounds make you flinch, tense up, or feel a jolt of stress.
- ☐ Certain noises make you feel distressed, or more upset or irritable than the situation seems to warrant.
- ☐ You find it harder to concentrate when there is background noise.
- ☐ You sometimes avoid places, or leave early, because of the noise.
- ☐ After a noisy day you feel worn out in a way that is hard to explain.
- ☐ You have been told you are too sensitive, or that the noise is not that bad.

If several of these feel true, this guide is for you. Recognising your experience is the first step, and everything that follows is here to help.

THE BASICS

What noise sensitivity is

Noise sensitivity means that sounds which most people can ignore or tune out cause you significant distress, discomfort, or difficulty functioning. It is a genuine difference in how the nervous system processes sound, not a matter of preference or low tolerance.

700,000+

autistic people in the UK

[1]

53–95%

of autistic people experience
sensory differences

[2]

~18%

of UK adults may experience sound
sensitivity

[3]

This is not about disliking loud music or finding a noisy restaurant annoying. That is a normal human response. A sound that barely registers for one person can be physically painful or mentally overwhelming for another. The difference is neurological.

For autistic people and those with ADHD, noise sensitivity often relates to how the brain filters sensory input. It is also present in people without either diagnosis, and is associated with anxiety, PTSD, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue conditions, and migraine. You do not need a label for the experience to be real.

What the evidence says

The National Autistic Society describes sensory differences as common among autistic people and a significant factor in daily life. [2]

CLEARING IT UP

What noise sensitivity is not

Noise sensitivity is often misunderstood. Separating what it is from what it is not can make it easier to explain, and easier to be taken seriously.

What it is

- A genuine difference in how the nervous system processes sound.
- A physical response, with real effects on the body and mind.
- Something that can sit alongside autism, ADHD, or appear on its own.
- Valid whether or not you have a diagnosis.

What it is not

- Being fussy, dramatic, or attention-seeking.
- The same as simply disliking loud music.
- A choice, or something you can decide to stop feeling.
- A weakness, or a flaw to be corrected.

Ordinary annoyance at noise fades when the noise stops. Noise sensitivity is different in both degree and nature, the response can be immediate, physical, and lasting. Naming that difference is not making excuses, it is describing something real.

EVERYDAY IMPACT

Could this be affecting your life?

Noise sensitivity rarely stays in one place. It can quietly shape how work feels, how rest feels at home, and how easy it is to be social. Seeing it laid out can help you recognise patterns you have lived with for a long time.

**At work**

- Difficulty concentrating through background noise
- Open-plan office fatigue that builds across the day
- Higher stress, and less left over by home time

**At home**

- Neighbour noise that is hard to switch off from
- Appliance hum, traffic, or building sounds
- Finding it difficult to fully relax or wind down

**Socially**

- Avoiding restaurants, cafes, or busy venues
- Leaving events early, or feeling unable to go
- Being misunderstood by people who do not feel it

None of this means you are doing anything wrong. It means the world around you is louder than it needs to be, and that there are practical ways to make it easier.

SETTING IT STRAIGHT

What people get wrong

A few common assumptions get in the way of understanding noise sensitivity. Here is what is often assumed, and what is actually true.

OFTEN ASSUMED

People sometimes assume everyone dislikes noise equally.

ACTUALLY

Noise sensitivity differs in both degree and impact. For some people the response is far stronger, and physical.

OFTEN ASSUMED

It is often said that you simply need to get used to it.

ACTUALLY

Repeated exposure often increases distress rather than reducing it. Pushing through is not the same as adjusting.

OFTEN ASSUMED

Many assume it only affects autistic people.

ACTUALLY

It affects many different groups, including people with ADHD and people with no diagnosis at all.

OFTEN ASSUMED

People may say you are overreacting.

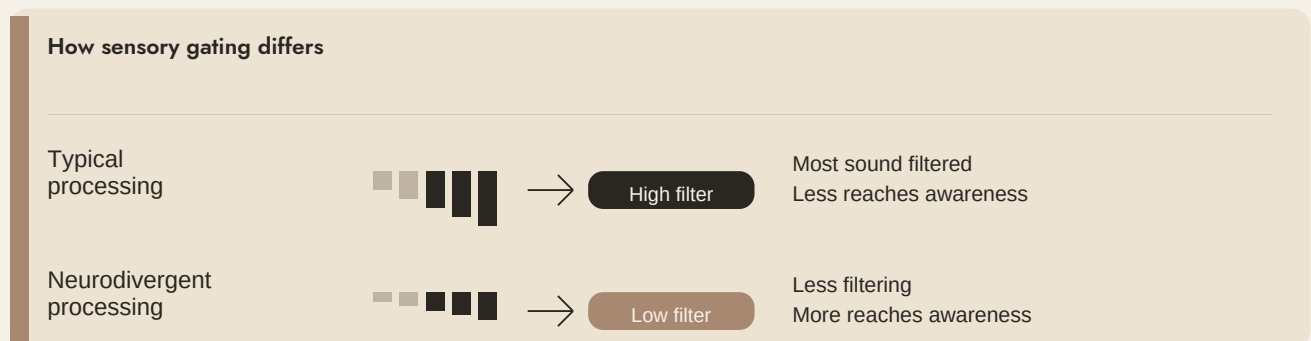
ACTUALLY

The response is neurological and physical, not a choice or an exaggeration.

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

Why it happens

Understanding what is happening in your nervous system when sound overwhelms you can make the experience feel less alarming and more manageable.



The brain constantly decides which sensory information matters, filtering signals before they reach full awareness. This is what lets most people hold a conversation in a cafe without being overwhelmed. For some people that filtering works differently, so more sound reaches conscious attention.

When the brain perceives a sound as threatening, it can trigger the fight, flight, or freeze response: raised heart rate, muscle tension, and reduced capacity for clear thinking. The distress is real and physical. It is not an overreaction.

This is common. An estimated 2.5 million people in England are thought to have ADHD, and around 3 to 4 percent of adults meet the clinical criteria. Many of them navigate sensory experiences like these every day. [4][5]

HOW OVERLOAD BUILDS

The overload cycle

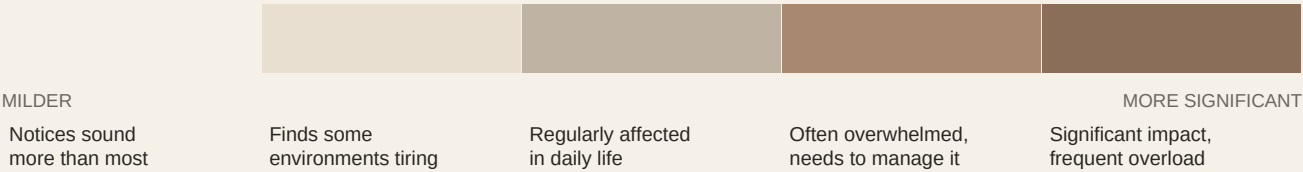
Overload rarely arrives all at once. It usually builds in stages. Knowing the stages helps you notice where you are, and step in earlier.



A SPECTRUM

The noise sensitivity spectrum

Noise sensitivity is not all-or-nothing. People experience it to very different degrees, and the same person can feel differently from one day to the next. This spectrum is a gentle way to locate yourself, not a diagnosis.



Noise sensitivity sits on a spectrum, and where you are on it can change from day to day. There is no threshold you must reach for your experience to be valid.

Wherever you sit, your experience is valid, and the tools in this guide can help. You may move along the spectrum depending on sleep, stress, health, and how much sound you have already managed that day.

THE LANGUAGE

Three terms you might hear

These three terms are sometimes used interchangeably, but they describe different things. Understanding the distinctions can help you describe your own experience more precisely.

Noise sensitivity

A broad umbrella term for being more affected by sounds than most people. It ranges from mild discomfort to significant distress, and is not a clinical diagnosis in itself.

Auditory defensiveness

A more specific term from occupational therapy, for a nervous-system response where certain sounds trigger a defensive reaction: a feeling of threat, a need to escape, or a physical response such as flinching or nausea.

Sensory overload

What happens when total sensory input exceeds what the nervous system can manage. It is not always sound alone, it can build from noise, busy visuals, and social demand together, and often ends in a sudden loss of capacity.

WHAT SETS IT OFF

Common triggers

Sound triggers vary from person to person, but these six categories appear consistently. As you read, you may recognise which feel most familiar; the workbook gives you space to note your own.



01

Unexpected sounds

Sudden sounds that cannot be anticipated trigger an immediate physical stress response before there is time to prepare.



02

High-pitched sounds

Certain frequencies, such as alarms or feedback, are often experienced as physically painful rather than merely unpleasant.



03

Low-pitched sounds

Deep, low-frequency sounds, such as a distant hum or traffic rumble, can be hard to locate, yet quietly draining over time.



04

Background build-up

Multiple sound sources quickly compound into overwhelm, even when each one alone would be manageable.



05

Persistent sounds

Sounds that continue without stopping, such as a fan or ticking clock, create sustained drain and are hard to ignore.



06

Overlapping voices

Crowded or open-plan spaces with many conversations are hard to filter, especially when you must take part too.

NOTICING EARLY

Early warning signs

Sensory overload rarely arrives all at once. Learning to notice the early signs gives you a chance to act before it builds. Everyone is different, but these are common signals to watch for.

**In the body**

A racing heart, tense shoulders or jaw, shallow breathing, a headache starting, feeling hot, or a sense of pressure in the head or ears.

**In the mind**

Finding it hard to think clearly, words becoming difficult, irritability rising, or a strong urge to escape the situation.

**In behaviour**

Covering your ears, going quiet, fidgeting more, snapping at people, or losing track of a conversation you were following.

Noticing one early sign is your cue to pause. Even a small action, stepping away, lowering the input, or slowing your breathing, can keep a difficult moment from becoming overload.

WHAT HELPS

Strategies, by your energy

When overload hits, executive function drops, so the usual advice to plan ahead can feel impossible in the moment. These tools are grouped by how much energy they ask of you, so reach for the right one for right now.

LOW

In the moment, when you have nothing left

**Ear defenders**

Kept within reach, they need no thought to use and work at once.

**Leave the room**

Removing yourself from a sound source is sensory management, not avoidance.

**Cover your ears**

A simple, immediate way to cut the input while you find your next step.

MEDIUM

Maintaining, when you have a little to spare

**Brown or white noise**

A steady background sound masks sudden noise and softens its edges.

**Communicate a boundary**

A short sentence, such as asking to lower the volume, with no need to justify it.

**Move to a quieter spot**

Choosing a calmer seat or corner where you can.

WHAT HELPS · CONTINUED

When you have planning energy

With more capacity, you can shape your environment in advance, so the difficult moments arrive less often and feel less sharp when they do.

HIGH**Preventative, when you have planning energy****Sound-absorbing materials**

Rugs, curtains, and soft furnishings reduce sound reflection over time.

**Set up a quiet space**

One reliably quieter spot to retreat to, even a corner with headphones.

**Know your threshold**

Notice how much noise you can manage in a day, and protect capacity in advance.

**Plan an exit**

Decide before an event how and when you can step out if you need to.

Building your own toolkit

You do not need every tool. Most people find that a small set, matched to their usual energy, works better than trying everything at once. The workbook on the following pages will help you choose.

MORE OPTIONS

More tools to try

Beyond the essentials, these options help some people build a more personal approach. Try what appeals, and leave the rest.

**Filtered earplugs**

Brands such as Loop lower overall volume while keeping speech clear, useful for social settings.

**Noise-cancelling headphones**

Active cancellation reduces steady background noise like engines or fans.

**A sound you choose**

Music, nature sound, or a familiar playlist can replace unpredictable noise with something within your control.

**Sunglasses or a cap**

Reducing visual input too can lower overall sensory load in bright, busy places.

**A comfort object**

Something familiar to hold or fidget with can steady you in a difficult moment.

**A signal to others**

An agreed gesture or phrase that lets people know you need quiet, without a long explanation.

AFTERWARDS

Recovering afterwards

Recovery is part of managing noise sensitivity, not a sign that you failed to cope. After a period of overload, your nervous system needs time and quiet to settle. Giving it that is necessary, not indulgent.

**Lower everything**

Find somewhere with less sound, softer light, and fewer demands. Reducing all input, not just noise, helps you settle faster.

**Let your body lead**

Rest, water, a warm drink, a blanket, or gentle movement. Follow what feels settling rather than what you think you should do.

**Protect the time**

Recovery takes as long as it takes. Where you can, clear the next demand so you are not pushing through before you are ready.

**Be kind afterwards**

Overload is tiring and can leave you low. Speaking to yourself gently, as you would to a friend, is part of recovering.

BEING UNDERSTOOD

Communicating your needs

Telling people about your noise sensitivity can feel awkward. You may worry about seeming demanding or difficult. The approaches below are clear and direct, and ask nothing of you by way of justification.

At work or in education

Many workplaces and schools must make reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent people under the Equality Act 2010. Adjustments might include a quieter workstation, permission to wear ear defenders, home working on demanding days, or an exemption from open-plan space. You do not need a formal diagnosis to ask. [6]

With family and friends

Simple, direct language works best with people who know you. 'I find background noise really hard to process' is clear and does not invite debate. 'It is a sensory thing, it affects my nervous system' adds context without overexplaining.

In public

'Could we sit somewhere quieter?' or 'I need to step outside for a moment' are complete sentences. Brief statements work better in the moment than longer explanations.

Phrases that may help:

- "I find noisy environments really hard to manage."
- "Sound sensitivity is part of how my nervous system works."
- "I am going to put my ear defenders on. It does not mean I am not listening."

FOR FAMILIES

Children and noise sensitivity

Many children experience noise sensitivity, and they do not always have the words for it. What can look like difficult behaviour is often a nervous system asking for relief. Understanding this changes how we respond.



What it can look like

Covering ears, melting down in busy places, refusing certain rooms or events, or becoming withdrawn and exhausted after a noisy day.



How to help

Take the distress seriously, offer ear defenders without making it a fuss, build in quiet breaks, and let the child leave a loud space when they need to.



What not to do

Avoid framing it as bad behaviour or something to grow out of. Pushing a child to tolerate more noise rarely builds tolerance, it usually builds fear.

FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

Signs a child may be noise sensitive

Children do not always have the words for noise sensitivity, so it often shows up in behaviour. What can look like difficulty is frequently a nervous system asking for relief.

What it can look like

- Covering or blocking their ears
- Avoiding toilets with loud hand dryers
- Distress or meltdowns at parties and busy events
- Refusing certain rooms, shops, or places
- Becoming withdrawn or exhausted after a noisy day

Ideas for school support

- Ear defenders for assemblies, the hall, or noisy lessons
- A quiet corner or agreed calm space to use when needed
- Break cards that let them step out without explaining
- Alternative lunch arrangements away from the busiest hall

You know your child best. These are starting points to discuss with them, and with their school, not a checklist to pass or fail.

A LIVED EXAMPLE

A day with noise sensitivity

The following is an illustrative example, drawn from common experiences rather than one real person, to show how noise sensitivity can shape an ordinary day.

Priya

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE · AN ADULT AT WORK

Priya works in an open-plan office. By mid-morning the overlapping conversations, the hum of the air conditioning, and a colleague's ringtone have stacked up into a low, constant pressure she cannot switch off.

She used to push through and arrive home too drained to speak. Now she keeps filtered earplugs in her drawer and puts them in before the noise builds. She has agreed with her manager that she can work from a quiet room for focused tasks.

The noise has not changed. What changed is that Priya stopped treating her response as a flaw, and started shaping her day around it. Some days are still hard. But she no longer ends every one of them empty.

A LIVED EXAMPLE

A parent's perspective

Another illustrative example, this time from a parent's point of view, showing how families can support a noise-sensitive child.

Daniel**ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE · A PARENT AND CHILD**

Daniel's son, Eli, would melt down at birthday parties, and Daniel used to feel judged, as though he simply could not manage his child. Then he learned that the noise of a crowded hall was genuinely overwhelming for Eli, not a behaviour to be corrected.

Now they prepare together. Eli wears ear defenders he chose himself, they agree a quiet corner he can go to, and they leave when he has had enough, with no fuss and no shame.

Daniel describes the change simply. Once he stopped asking Eli to cope with the world as it was, and started adjusting the world a little for Eli, the meltdowns eased, and the days got kinder for both of them.

GOING FURTHER

Where to find support

This guide is a starting point. The following resources offer more depth, community, and support.

Autistica

The UK's leading autism research charity.

autistica.org.uk

ADHD UK

Resources, community, and support for people with ADHD.

adhd.uk.co.uk

The National Autistic Society

Information, advice, and community for autistic people and their families.

autism.org.uk

Sensory Integration Education

UK education and training on sensory processing.

sensoryintegration.org.uk

If you are newly exploring noise sensitivity, speaking to your GP or an occupational therapist with sensory processing training is a useful next step.

AT A GLANCE

One-page summary

What it is

A real, neurological difference in how the brain filters sound. Not fussiness, and valid without a diagnosis.

Why it happens

Less sensory filtering means more sound reaches awareness, which can trigger a physical stress response.

Common triggers

Unexpected, high or low-pitched, persistent, or overlapping sounds, and many quieter sounds building up.

Early signs

A racing heart, tension, trouble thinking, irritability, or an urge to escape. Notice these as your cue to act.

In the moment

Low energy: ear defenders, leave the room. Medium: brown noise, set a boundary. High: plan ahead, shape your space.

Recovery

Lower all input, rest, protect the time, and be kind to yourself. Recovery is necessary, not indulgent.

Remember

The world is too loud. The problem is the world, not you, and you never have to justify what you need.

START HERE

Three things you can do today

You do not need to read the whole guide before anything changes. These three steps take very little energy, and they make a real difference.

**Identify your biggest trigger**

Notice the one sound or place that affects you most. Naming it is the first step to planning around it.

1

**Carry hearing protection**

Keep earplugs or ear defenders where you will actually have them. Within reach means they get used.

2

**Create one quieter space**

Set up a single calmer spot you can return to, at home or at work, even a corner with headphones.

3

That is enough to start. When you have more capacity, the rest of the guide is here for whenever you want it.

REFERENCES

References and further reading

Every factual claim in this guide is drawn from the sources below. Figures are cited inline using the bracketed numbers.

-
- [1] National Autistic Society. "What is autism." autism.org.uk. Accessed June 2026.
 - [2] National Autistic Society. "Sensory differences." autism.org.uk. Accessed June 2026.
 - [3] Vitoratou S, et al. "Misophonia in the UK: a population study." PLOS ONE. 2023;18(3):e0282777. King's College London. Accessed June 2026.
 - [4] NHS Digital. "ADHD management information." digital.nhs.uk. 2025. Accessed June 2026.
 - [5] NICE. "Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: diagnosis and management." NG87. 2018, updated 2023. Accessed June 2026.
 - [6] Equality Act 2010, c. 15. Reasonable adjustments, sections 20 to 22. Available at: legislation.gov.uk. Accessed June 2026.

This guide is written by Nadine Benjamin BA (Hons), ACIM, founder of hushri. It is reviewed for accuracy and updated as new information becomes available. If you spot something that needs correcting, use the contact form at hushri.com/contact. Corrections are always welcome.

On method: research tools, including AI, may be used to gather and organise source material during preparation. Every factual claim is then checked by a person against the cited sources before publication. The references above are the basis for this guide.



ABOUT hushri

for anyone who finds the world too loud.

hushri is the human home for noise sensitivity and sensory difference — built from lived experience, in the belief that the problem is the world, not the people in it.

WHAT WE STAND FOR

Accessibility

Barriers removed, so support is easy to reach.

Honesty

We say what is true, clearly and without spin.

Respect

Every person met as they are, without judgement.

Friendliness

Warm, approachable, and never clinical.

Inclusivity

You are welcomed, represented, and made to belong.

Sincerity

We mean what we say, and we say it with care.

SCAN TO EXPLORE hushri



Read & explore

Guides, tools and support at
hushri.com



Watch & listen

Calming videos on
YouTube @hushri