

Sensory Strategies to Support Participation in Personal Care



These guidelines contain general information to support people who experience sensory sensitivities with their personal care. They are not intended to replace individualised occupational therapy assessment and advice.

Created by Occupational Therapy Services, Brothers of Charity Services Ireland.

Sensory Strategies to Support Participation in Personal Care

Personal Care:

Personal care activities of daily living are essential tasks that we need to perform on a daily basis to maintain our personal hygiene, health, and overall wellbeing.



Sensory Strategies:

Difficulties may arise in personal care due to heightened or altered sensory sensitivities. These difficulties can affect how a person experiences and responds to various sensory stimuli, such as touch, sound, smell, and temperature, during routine activities like bathing, brushing teeth, or grooming.

If a person is 'sensitive' or avoids personal care activities, it may be because they dislike the sensory input involved in an activity e.g. the feeling of water, the smell of soap, the taste of toothpaste.

Addressing these difficulties often requires a tailored approach, adjusting the environment, adapting the activity, using specific products, or developing strategies to enhance the experience of personal care for the person.

Considerations:

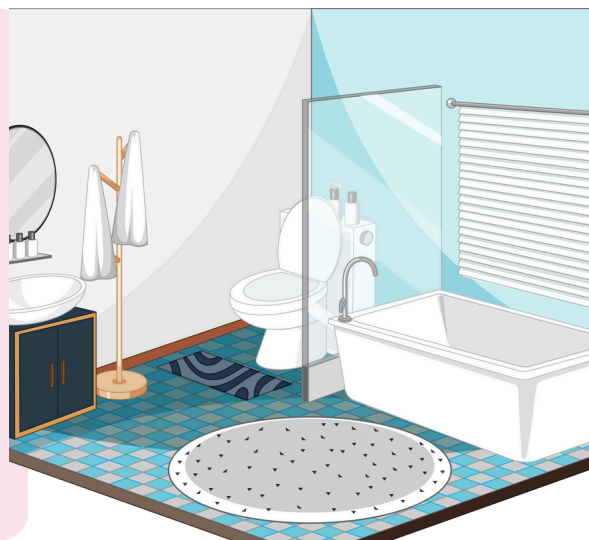
Consider the person's communication style e.g. pictures, words, photos, objects of reference. Have these communication supports available during personal care tasks.

Consent is an important consideration when assisting a person to engage in a personal care task.

Supportive Strategies for Personal Care Tasks

Setting up the room

- Ensure the environment is calm and organised.
- Use dim lights and limit distractions.
- Switch off background noises e.g. radio, TV.
- Lay out required items so they are visible.
- Remove excess clutter.
- Involve the person in the set up and clean up where possible.



Setting up the task

- Consider scheduling the task at consistent times/days. This supports predictability, which may help the person to remain calm.
- Build a consistent routine around the task, so the person is familiar with what is expected at each step.
- Ensure a clear and accessible visual layout, such as arranging products in the order of use.
- Offer clear explanations with visual support like 'first and then' or visual schedules/visual stories.
- Demonstrate the steps of the task so the person can copy you.
- Minimise the level of verbal instruction to avoid overloading the person.
- Use neutral products with no smell where possible. If using scented products, ensure this is a known preference or calming scent for the person,
- Use calming activities prior to the task e.g. massage, listen to preferred music.

Supporting the person

- Sensory stories about personal care tasks, which include sensory strategies, can help prepare a person for the sensations they are going to experience e.g. hair cutting.
- Be mindful of where you are positioned in relation to the person, e.g. approaching the person from the side is more comfortable than from behind.
- A mirror can be helpful so a person can see the individual helping them, as well as seeing themselves.
- Allow the person to make choices and have some control over the task.
- Support the person to do as much of the task themselves.
- Doing the task themselves changes the sensory experience for the person and can support increased tolerance of the task.
- It can help to know how long a task will take and when it will be finished. Using a song or timer can show when the activity will start and stop.
- Ensure that the task is stopped at the agreed point, e.g. end of song/timer, even if not fully completed. This builds trust and supports predictability.
- Consider a person's preference if providing hands-on assistance. Light touch may be distressing for some people. Firm touch can have a calming effect and can assist with regulation.
- Consider the use of your own tone and pitch of voice e.g. a soft and reassuring tone can be supportive.
- Some people respond to a fun approach and humour.



Showering/Bathing

Showering and bathing may be difficult for anyone who has heightened sensitivity to temperature, water pressure, sounds and the feel of water.



Setting up the room and task:

- Ensure the environment is calm, organised and predictable.
- Where possible, involve the person in the set up and clean up.
- Excess clutter should be removed and distractions should be limited.
- Schedule the task at consistent times/days.
- Complete the task in the same way every time so the person is familiar with what is expected.
- A song or timer can be used to show the person when the task will start and stop.
- Ensure that the task is stopped at the agreed point e.g. end of song/timer, even if it is not fully completed.
- If necessary, break the shower routine into stages. A picture sequence of steps could be used e.g. wash hair, wash back.
- Ensure privacy is respected as much as possible. This helps individuals feel safe and reduces anxiety.
- Use fragrance free or mildly scented products with natural ingredients. This might support sensitive skin.



Showering/Bathing

Supporting the person:

- Consider personal preference - does the person prefer a shower or a bath? Might they prefer to sit, or stand?
- Offer choices where possible e.g. temperature of the water, the type of soap. Their preferences may be different to yours.
- Baths can offer more control over the sensory experience for people who are sensitive to showers.
- Adjust the water temperature according to the person's preferences.
- Trial different water pressures using a hand held shower head to establish a person's preferences. e.g. rainfall shower, removing shower head. A person may like to hold the shower head to control the direction of flow.
- Offer the opportunity for water play by introducing objects of interest and water jugs.
- Use of a visual timer may assist a person in continuing or stopping the activity.
- Consider texture; a soft washcloth or sponge may be preferable instead of a loofah or brush.
- Consider using soft towels for drying. Pat dry with the towel or rub the skin vigorously depending on preference.
- A large towel can be used to quickly and firmly wrap the person providing deep pressure to the body.
- Sourcing a preferred scent or using fragrance free products may support those who are sensitive to smells.
- Ensure privacy is respected as much as possible. This helps people to feel safe and reduces anxiety.

Dressing



Some people may be sensitive to dressing/clothing. A person might demonstrate that they are sensitive to clothing through pulling at or removing their clothes, or being particularly attached to certain types of clothing.

Setting up the room and task:

- Where possible, let the person choose their own clothing.
- Set the clothes out before dressing. This can be done the night before or directly before the activity.
- Using visual checklists or prompts to support the person to get dressed in order.
- Maintaining communication throughout the task can increase familiarity with the process and reduce anxiety.
- Be mindful that the level of lighting, heating and noise within the room is comfortable and supportive for the person.
- Ensure privacy is respected. This helps individuals feel safe.
- Consider the type of socks e.g. seamless, tight/loose, long/short, the fabric of the sock. Simply turning socks inside out can reduce irritation of seams. Some people find socks uncomfortable and choose not to wear them.
- Some people who like deep pressure may like their shoes fastened tightly. Others may prefer to go barefoot, but may tolerate sliders or crocs better than closed shoes.
- Offer the person a choice of clothing appropriate to the weather. Proactively teaching the appropriate clothing for different weather might be supportive. Visuals/pictures can support the person's understanding.
- Some people have difficulty transitioning between seasonal clothing. Consider removing winter clothing from the wardrobe in the summer season and vice versa. However, be mindful that some people have certain clothing preferences despite the season/weather.



Dressing

Supporting the person:

- Certain fabrics can feel irritating to the skin e.g. wool, tweed, synthetic fibres. Cotton, fleece or flannel might be more comfortable.
- Consider using preferred scented or fragrance-free washing products for clothing.
- Labels on clothing can sometimes cause distress (might feel itchy). These can be easily cut off or removed.
- The neckline, cuffs, seams or zips in clothing could contribute to irritation. Consider options such as seamless clothing, loose or low neck tops, drawstring or elastic waistbands.
- Some people prefer wearing loose clothing. Others may prefer tight clothing e.g. 'skins' clothing/sports clothing.
- If a person prefers to wear several layers of clothing, they may be seeking deep pressure. Substituting this with a tight underlayer may be an option as this provides deep pressure to the skin. This can have a calming effect on the body.
- A person may like to stamp their feet for deep pressure input or receive a firm foot massage prior to putting on footwear.
- The transition of removing clothes may be difficult for some people e.g. reluctance to take off a coat indoors. Consider offering them deep pressure directly after the coat is taken off; offer them an alternative to their coat indoors e.g. a light jacket or cardigan. Be mindful of the person's temperature preferences and look out for signs of overheating/cold.
- If a person finds clothing uncomfortable and prefers to remove them entirely, this can be supported through exploring clothing alternatives as described above and providing appropriate opportunities to be without clothing e.g. in the privacy of their bedroom, after showering or having a bath.
- Always promote choice and control. Respect the person's preference for what they choose to wear if this does not impact hygiene or health significantly.

Hand Washing

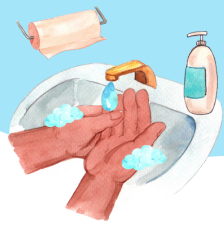


Handwashing can be challenging for individuals with sensory difficulties due to the number of sensations involved.

Setting up the room and task:

- Create a personalised routine around handwashing.
- Use visuals to support the steps involved in handwashing.
- Explain or demonstrate each step before the person does it.
- Consider the temperature and flow of the water – would the person prefer lukewarm or cold? Others might prefer a high pressure/flow of water instead of a light trickle.
- Reduce background noise or dim lighting if needed to reduce any extra distress or distractions.
- Consider if the person might prefer a soft cloth, or a firm brush to clean hands.
- Consider if the person would like to sing a song or listen to music for the duration of handwashing to make this activity more enjoyable.





Hand Washing



Supporting the person:

- Involve the person in choosing soap/lotions.
- Try to introduce fun water activities to reduce sensitivities e.g. water play, offer liquids in other contexts (e.g. washing vegetables/fruit, pots and pans) so that this routine is not always associated with hand washing only.
- Offer a lotion afterwards. This could be either scented or unscented, depending on preference.
- If handwashing is very distressing, consider alternative methods such as use of hand sanitiser regularly, hand wipes, or encourage thorough hand washing when showering. However, be mindful that hand sanitiser also comes in many textures and can be unpleasant to smell, so this may not work for everyone.



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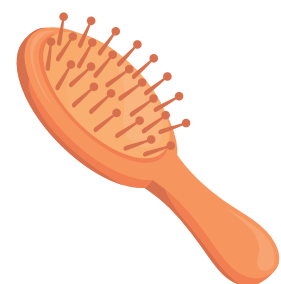
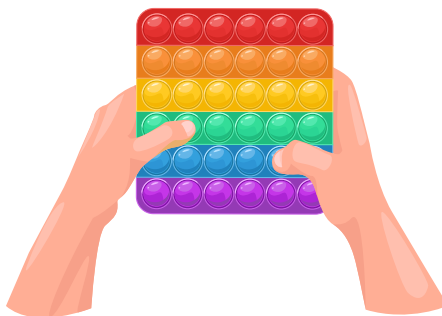
Hair Washing & Brushing

If a person is finding hair brushing or washing distressing, this could indicate that they are sensitive to touch on their heads. They may try to avoid this or display stress response during this activity.



Setting up the room and task:

- Communicate with the person the steps involved in hair washing. This could be done verbally, through pictures, or by showing them objects associated with the task.
- If the person dislikes washing their hair in the shower, alternatives can be offered e.g. washing their hair over the sink, dry shampoo or various adaptive aids.
- Consider establishing a routine around hair washing e.g. on the same days weekly, or when attending the swimming pool.
- Keep the person's hair washing routine consistent e.g. what is done first, or last? Does the person scrub or rinse their own hair? Agree the sequence of events/routine beforehand.
- Play relaxing music in the background (if this is preferred) and agree the finish time in conjunction with the duration of a song. This may reduce anxiety.
- Distraction techniques may be helpful e.g. singing, fidget items, as they add an element of fun to the task.

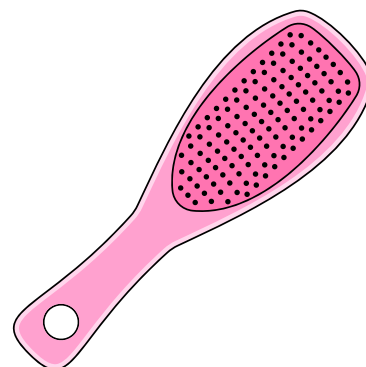




Hair Washing & Brushing

Supporting the person:

- Use firm touch when massaging shampoo.
- Use products with no smell or only known preferred scents.
- Consider using a shampoo eye shield which could prevent water going on to the person's face.
- Using a mirror may aid predictability to the person can see what is happening.
- Using a towel to provide deep pressure touch may be calming.
- Consider a head massage before hair brushing to relax the person. If possible, support the person to brush their own hair.
- If brushing long hair, use a soft hair brush e.g. tangle teaser. Hold the section of hair above the section being brushed. This reduces the impact of knots or tangles.



Hair Cutting



If a person is finding hair cutting distressing, this could indicate that they are particularly sensitive to touch on their heads. They may try to avoid this or display stress response during this activity.

Setting up the room and task:

- Explain the process beforehand using visual aids, for example photos of the steps of the haircut.
- Let the individual observe a haircut or watch a video of the process.
- Introduce the tools (scissors, clippers) to the individual to reduce fear.
- Where possible, use a chair that the individual is comfortable in.
- Provide a cape or towel to minimize the feeling of hair on the skin.
- Use noise-cancelling headphones/earbuds or play calming music in the environment to block out the sound of the clippers.
- Use a spray bottle with warm water instead of using a wash basin to wet the hair.
- Consider whether hair cutting is more successful in the person's home or in the community.
- Carry out the haircut in a calm, quiet environment.



Hair Cutting

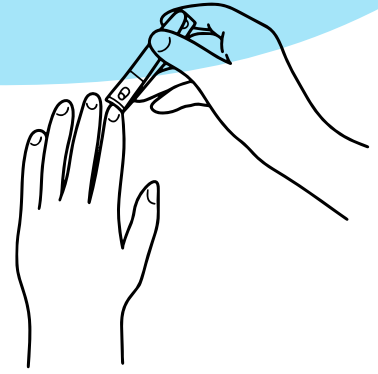
Supporting the person:

- If needed, start with small, graded steps. E.g. begin by combing the hair and then proceed to small trims.
- Allow breaks if the individual becomes overwhelmed.
- Use gentle, slow movements.
- Maintaining communication throughout the task can increase familiarity with the process and reduce anxiety.
- The person might like to watch a TV or play on a tablet to distract themselves during haircutting.
- The person may feel comforted by holding a preferred comfort item or fidget.
- A head massage might also help desensitise the head prior to haircutting.



Nail Cutting

If a person is finding nail cutting distressing, it could indicate that they are sensitive to touch. It may also be related to a negative past experience with nail cutting e.g. pain. Some people don't like the feeling of their nails after they have been cut, as it feels different. They may try to avoid this or become stressed in the lead up to, or during this activity.



Setting up the task and environment:

- Create a predictable, consistent routine around nail cutting.
- A timer (or song/music) may assist with indicating the start and end of the activity.
- Preferred distraction items could be used e.g. tablet, TV, snack.
- Timing the activity after a shower or bath may assist as nails are softer and easier to cut.
- Demonstrate on your nails first to provide reassurance about what will happen.
- Use words like 'trim' or 'shortened' which is less threatening than 'cut'.
- Give praise and encouragement throughout the task.
- Avoid cutting nails too short and trim more regularly.
- A nail file can be considered if this is preferred, or experiment with different tools.
- Offer a preferred activity directly after to provide reassurance and comfort.



Nail Cutting

Supporting the person:

- Deep touch massage to the hands and fingers can be used to reduce sensitivity. Using firm deep pressure e.g. squeezing finger/toe nails prior to cutting can greatly reduce sensitivity.
- While cutting, hold the finger at the nailbed providing deep pressure here while cutting.
- Offer deep pressure massage or reassuring touch between cutting nails.
- Items such as a stress ball, preferred fidget toy or a hand-held vibrating device can provide deep pressure touch, which may reduce sensitivity in the hands and fingers.
- Consider the person's preferences. It may be easier for the person if one nail is cut a day, rather than all nails cut at the same time.



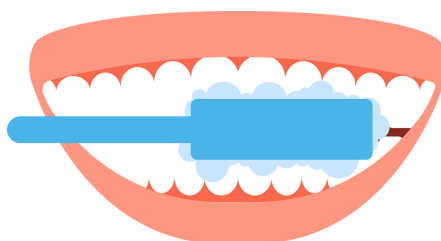
Tooth Brushing



A person can be particularly sensitive in or around their mouth, they may try to avoid this or become stressed. There may be others factors causing stress during tooth brushing e.g. pain, underlying dental concerns, or personal space.

Setting up the room and task:

- Create a predictable and consistent routine around tooth brushing.
- Try to include choice and encourage a person to e.g. choose their toothbrush in the shop
- Use visuals to create a predictable structure e.g. top teeth first.
- A timer (or song/music) may assist with indicating the start and end of the activity.
- Create a fun atmosphere e.g. using games or interactive timers.

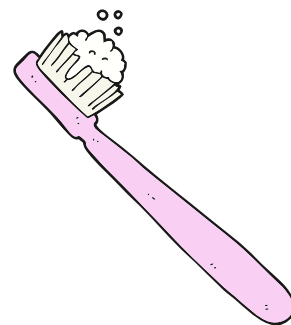
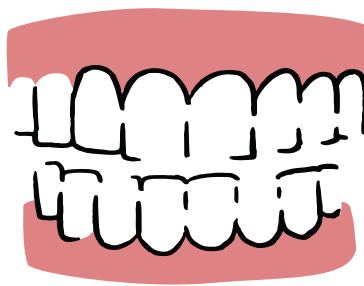




Teeth Brushing

Supporting the person:

- Use a mild-flavoured toothpaste if preferred, or a flavour-less option.
- Brush teeth in front of the mirror and consider using a stool or chair to sit on during the task.
- Assist the person to hold the toothbrush if required and encourage active participation.
- Consider what toothbrush is being used. Does the person respond better to soft or hard bristles?
- Try an electric toothbrush as vibration may be calming for some people and can clean teeth quickly.
- Consider using an alternative toothbrush if required e.g. U-shaped toothbrush or Dr. Barman's toothbrush.
- Seek advice from your dentist or hygienist regarding oral healthcare and management.



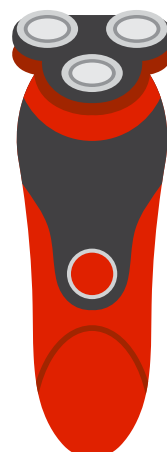
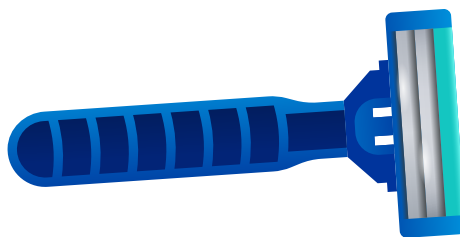
Shaving

Shaving can be a particularly distressing activity as razors are sharp on the skin, and the feeling associated with either longer hair (beard) or short stubble can be particularly irritating for some.



Setting up the room and task:

- Create a calm and quiet environment e.g. reduce lighting/noises.
- If preferred, create distractions e.g. with videos, music, or stories to distract them during the process.
- Use visuals e.g. pictures or stories to explain what will happen during shaving.
- Offer a comfort item or encourage breaks to move around if needed.
- Consider the tools you are using. A person might prefer an electric razor, this can be safer for moving around. Alternatively, a razor blade is quieter and creates less vibration, so may be more comfortable.

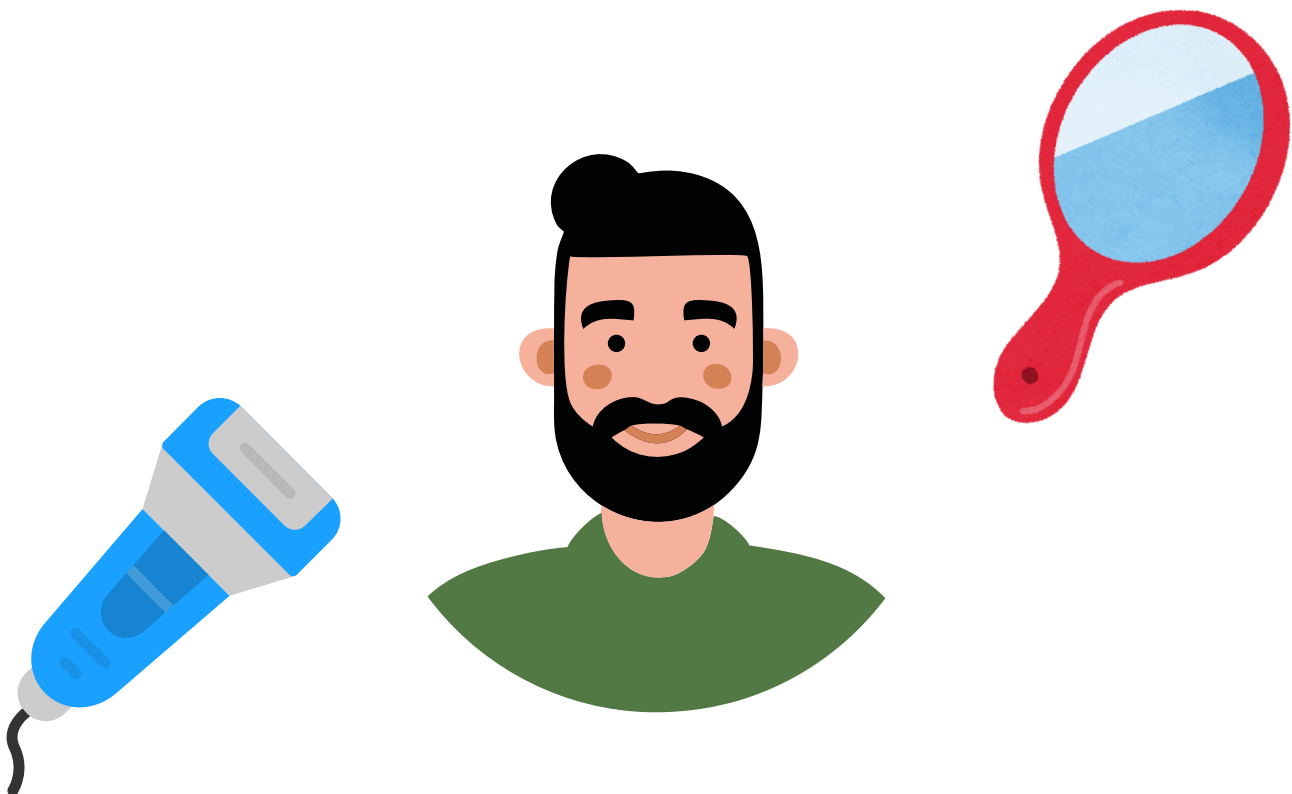




Shaving

Supporting the person:

- Show the tools and let the individual touch them.
- Slow and steady: Start with small, manageable areas. Move slowly and watch for signs of discomfort.
- Explain each step before you do it, give reassurance.
- Consider the person's preference and alternatives e.g. having facial hair, if this is more tolerable for the person, and reduces the need for shaving.



Toileting

Individuals may be sensitive to the sounds, smells, and physical sensations associated with toileting. Try to identify specific sensory triggers and find ways to minimise them.



Setting up the room and task:

- Establish a consistent routine around toileting in all environments.
- Encourage the person to use the toilet at specific times or around specific activities throughout the day e.g. before breakfast, before leaving in the car or after dinner.
- This can also include regular prompts/visual prompts. Visual schedules or accessible stories can be helpful.
- Consider using familiar toilets, use the same steps for toileting every time and ensure everybody is using the same language.
- Think about wiping, often different carers will support the person differently. Visuals and stories might help the carers be consistent, along with supporting the person themselves.
- Consider if there is an option for a single use accessible bathroom, rather than in a crowded communal one.
- Limit background noise if preferred, and reduce lighting.
- If someone is sensitive to the sound of the toilet flushing, consider using quieter flushing mechanisms or allow the person to leave the room before flushing.
- Ensure that ventilation fans are quiet and do not produce sudden loud noises.
- Avoid strong scents from cleaning products or air fresheners, as these can be overwhelming. Use lightly scented products to ensure the area is clean and free of unpleasant odours.
- Create a positive association with toileting through encouragement or use of a preferred item.
- Ensure privacy is respected as much as possible. This helps individuals feel safe and reduces anxiety.



Toileting

Supporting the person:

- If the person does not like odours associated with toileting, consider masking this with preferred smells/scents e.g. favourite aftershave/perfume, or scented oil.
- Consider providing options such as soft toilet paper and wipes to cater to different preferences.
- Offer a choice between hand dryers and towels, as the sound of hand dryers can be unpleasant for some.
- Modified toilet seat e.g. heated or padded seats can be considered if this is preferred.
- Ensure that the person feels as stable as possible e.g. use a foot stool or grab rails, to help balance if needed. This will help them to feel more secure.
- Consider personal and specific sensory tools, such as noise-cancelling headphones, weighted lap pads or handheld fidget items.

