

## 5 Autism Simulations to Help You Experience Sensory Overload

By Matt Petronzio Apr 23, 2014

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) describes a complex group of brain development disorders characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication and behavior. Often diagnosed at a young age, approximately one in 68 American children is on the autism spectrum. It's a figure 10 times higher than 40 years ago, according to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#).

Because ASD can vary widely, it's frequently misunderstood, and attitudes toward autism can be misguided. In addition to the many resources geared toward neurotypical people, such as [social networks for parents](#) and organizations like [Autism Speaks](#), many autistic individuals and even game developers have created virtual simulations that render common experiences for people with autism — hypersensitivity to sights and sounds among them.

"Increased sensitivity and decreased sensitivity both are common in ASD," Dr. Paul Wang, head of medical research at Autism Speaks, tells *Mashable*. "In fact, one of the changes in the [DSM-5](#) criteria for ASD is recognition of these issues as a core part of autism."

Wang says these sensory challenges can be very impairing, turning a normally comfortable environment into a struggle for individuals with ASD. The severity of discomfort can range widely: Anything from the cuffs of one's short-sleeve shirt to loud noises to perceptions many of us experience without thinking twice can cause distress.

"It is hard to appreciate what it is like to be in the shoes of someone with ASD," Wang says. "To the extent that these simulations can illustrate how noxious sensory stimulation can be for individuals with ASD, they may help the general population to better understand the difficulty of living with ASD."

Noted autism activist and animal science expert Temple Grandin famously said, "I am different, not less." During [Autism Awareness Month](#), the following simulations help to further that understanding.

**Note: Those with epilepsy or who are prone to seizures should not watch these videos. Viewers should also be prepared for increased volumes, which are intended to simulate the intense auditory stimulation associated with ASD.**

- **1. Playground**

During Vancouver's Hacking Health weekend hackathon in 2013, Taylan Kadayifcioglu and his team created *Auti-sim*, an unsettling first-person game that allows the player to experience hypersensitivity. *Auti-sim* features layered, deafening shrieks from faceless children and fuzzy visuals, causing the player to retreat in order to see and hear clearly.

Kadayifcioglu was inspired by other sensory simulations he found on YouTube.

Video: YouTube, [Taylan Kay](#)

- **2. Watching a Movie**

YouTube user WeirdGirlCyndi, an autistic adult who was "sick of so-called 'experts' trying to explain what they think an autistic person is going through," created this simulation in order to set the record straight.

She takes a scene from 1986's *Transformers* and distorts the sound and picture to simulate sensory overload. "Eventually I won't be able to process the movie at all," she writes in the video. "I'll see it, but I won't remember it."

Video: YouTube, [WeirdGirlCyndi](#)

- **3. Shopping at Walmart**

This simulation is an excerpt from the user's 56-minute documentary, *Inside Autism*. She takes the viewer on a trip to Walmart, and simulates sensory overload on what she calls a "bad day." The camera becomes pixelated and the noise level increases drastically.

Video: YouTube, [streamofawareness](#)

- **4. Walking Down the Street**

In this simulation, you'll see the contrast between walking on a sidewalk as a neurotypical person and as an autistic person. Similar to the previous video, sounds become amplified and jumbled, while the lighting gets much brighter.

Video: YouTube, [Craig Thomson](#)

- **5. Sitting in a Coffee Shop**

This video is based on an excerpt from *Carly's Voice: Breaking Through Autism*, written by a 17-year-old girl living with non-verbal autism. The simulation shows how even getting a cup of coffee with family can be difficult and anxiety-producing.

Video: YouTube, [Carly Fleischmann](#)