Ashley’s Corner
By [Ashley Mathy](https://www.facebook.com/ashley.mathy), Article 2, March 2016

Hi, my name is Ashley; I am 20 years old and have been riding at Willow Creek Ranch for nearly 6 years. I was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, (PDD-NOS), which is a form of autism. In this article I would like to educate my audience on sensory overload and what noises in my environment affect my emotions and behavior, and how you may be able to help someone with special needs!

What is sensory overload? Sensory overload occurs when one or more of the body's senses experience over-stimulation from the environment; a condition of receiving too much information via visual or audio sources.
Sensory overload is often mixed with anxiety, and may lead to meltdowns and tremors. These difficulties can make ordinary situations feel overwhelming, can interfere with daily function and even isolate individuals and their families.

Sensory overload noises are usually triggered by an event. I have listed some noises that cause anxiety for me and several others. Noises that could overwhelm a person can include, but are not limited to: cars, trucks and construction equipment; trains, fire trucks and ambulance sirens and bells; large crowds and people laughing, arguing, or shouting; clicking, ticking, or tapping of something; wind, rain, and thunderstorms; lights and fans that flicker or buzz; checkout line scanners; music, and even a vacuum cleaner.

The symptoms of sensory overload can vary, but a person may tell you they are tired; shut down or refuse to participate in activities; run away from the situation; have a tantrum or display other behaviors that may seem inappropriate; avoids being touched by objects or people; gets overexcited; covers eyes and/or ears, may be hard to listen and take directions; or has poor eye contact. For me it is physically and mentally exhausting to be in sensory overload. It may be hard to focus on what people are saying or just to focus in general, therefore becoming more difficult to complete a task. Being able to identify one’s own triggers of sensory overload can help reduce, eliminate, or avoid them all together.

Often the quickest way to ease this is to remove oneself from the situation. If you are with someone having sensory overload, provide an exit, see if you can take them outside or to a quiet place, or offer to take their hand if they can be touched. A person in sensory overload may begin rocking back and forth, and if so, it is important not to use an assertive voice to ask them to stop rocking, and don’t tell them they are making a scene.

As a parent, teacher or caregiver it is important to communicate safety and comfort so the person does not feel threatened. Reducing sensory input and eliminating distressing sounds can help calm a person. You can try slowing down your movements, and change your tone of voice. Sometimes you may not realize that the person is struggling. Be compassionate, understanding, loving, empathetic and responsive to their needs; encourage others to give that person some space. Have available sensory items such as: noise cancelling headphones, a sitting cushion, a stress ball, or a favorite stuff animal to distract them from the situation. A person with special needs can tell when people are watching, and may be embarrassed or ashamed if they feel like they are being stared at.

My next topic will be sensitivity to clothing. If you have any questions or comments for Ashley, email wcrvolunteercoordinator@mail.com and put “Ashley’s Corner” in the subject line.