autism wellbeing

Top Tips for Brushing Teeth: Senses

Taste: The taste of the toothpaste may be unpleasant, try alternative flavours.

Smell: Bathrooms may smell strongly – toothpaste, cleaning products, toilet smells and perfumes. This can be overwhelming and the bathroom may not be the most regulating place to brush your teeth. If you are supporting someone else – be aware of your own body odour and perfume too if you are up close to them.

Auditory: The noise of the toothbrush bristles, the running water, the sound of water in your mouth can all be distressing. Noises inside your mouth can feel amplified in your head. Bathroom acoustics can be echoey because of hard surfaces and few soft furnishings.

Interoception: How we feel about brushing our teeth and how those feelings manifest in our bodies will have an important effect. Emotions can be aroused more quickly when we are distressed.

Touch: The feel of the toothbrush or the cold temperature of the water can be distressing – try a different type of brush or warm water. If you are helping someone brush their teeth, they may feel extremely anxious about predicting when you will touch them. Clean teeth feel very different to dirty teeth – this may feel pleasant or unpleasant. Brushing may trigger the gag reflex or vomiting. The sensation of foamy toothpaste in the mouth and dribbling down the chin may feel distressing.

Visual: Mirrors can be distressing for some people. Bright lights in a bathroom and lots of white, shiny surfaces can feel overwhelming. Seeing the toilet or bath may remind the person about that activity and they may not understand what is expected of them or they may associate those objects with distressing experiences.

Vestibular: Some people experience distress at being upstairs (where you frequently find bathrooms) because of their vestibular processing and the effects of the pull of gravity on their bodies.

Proprioception: If you have week proprioception or touch sensation within your mouth it can feel alarming and scary when your teeth are being brushed. Standing up at the sink whilst coordinating your movements to brush your teeth can be exhausting and tricky to coordinate.