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Light Sensitivity

No, this does not mean you are extremely afraid of getting a sunburn! It is a sensitivity to glare, brightness, and certain lighting conditions. Which ones? Besides fluorescent lighting, there can be a sensitivity to bright sunlight, haze, and overcast conditions.

Individuals with SSS often state that lighting is bright. They might find artificial light "too bright," with full fluorescent lighting often the worst offender. Some read with all the lights off. Although most people with SSS prefer to read in dim light, some prefer more light. Those individuals feel as if they never have enough light to read comfortably. Some individuals can never find the right position to read and keep wiggling, squirming, or changing positions.

When individuals with SSS read under fluorescent lighting, they might experience dizziness and a sense of agitation or restlessness that could result in headaches, even migraines. They usually prefer to read under dimmer or indirect natural light. They might try to shade the reading material from overhead lights. Light-sensitive individuals under any type of lighting conditions might experience fatigue, which reduces the amount of energy available for visually intensive tasks such as reading.

Individuals who are light sensitive experience problems with glare in their environment and on the printed page. The sensitivity to glare makes it a battle to keep the eye on the page and to move across the line consistently and effectively.

Light sensitivity might also result in difficulty driving at night because of streetlights and oncoming headlights.

A published author and playwright, Ayofemi Folayan, talks about her difficulty with fluorescent lighting:

When I wasn't sitting under fluorescent lights, I was so much smarter than everybody else. I could

do math calculations in my head real fast. I could memorize things nobody else could. Once I figured things out, I understood them in a way that meant I would always remember them. For a long time I had no idea why I couldn't read or why my mind started to wander while I sat in school under fluorescent lights. When I was home and tried to study, I was able to make much more progress.

Part of why it was so frustrating was that I had no language to talk about what I was experiencing. I didn't know everybody didn't get a terrible headache from fluorescent lights. I didn't know that other kids could look at a page of print and the lines would stay neatly [instead of moving] at a crazy angle like worms trying to squeeze out the neck of a bottle. All these things happened under fluorescent lights and burned away my ability to think, understand, and effectively communicate. If I had known, I wouldn't have felt so stupid or so hopeless.

Inadequate Background Accommodation

This is trouble dealing with high contrasts, such as between black and white. (See Figure 3.1.) High contrast is supposed to be the best for reading because it allows the letters to dominate with no interference from the background. You notice the letters and nothing else. For those with SSS there is insufficient contrast between the black letters and the white background. The background begins to compete for their attention. The white can even become dominant, and then the letters lose their distinctiveness. The background can overpower the black, making the letters less readable. One student explains:

When I look at the page, I don't see the words. Instead, I am acutely aware of the white spaces.

Letters and words can appear to pulsate. Instead of the print remaining the same in tone and intensity, letters can keep changing from black to grey to black.

The letters seem to be moving. The page seems spotty, and the words keep fading in and out. It is hard to distinguish what is on the page. I can only read a few lines before I have to look up.

There are different types of resolution problems. Letters tilt, stretch, overlap, run into the line above or below. Lines of print rotate around and around. Whole lines of print end up on top of each other. So many different things can happen all over the page, but rarely does just one distortion occur alone.

The letters have a life of their own. The print is not black but unevenly shaded, and the background is glaring. The words I try to read are not firmly printed on the page but seem engaged in a complex dance, and other words keep crowding in.

There are flashing lights blocking things out. Flashing red blobs obliterate the page. The print disappears, and assorted colored shapes drift over the page. Reading is harrowing.

The range of perceptual distortions is vast. (Readers wishing to view additional illustrations should see Figures 3.7, 3.8, and 3.9.)

Restricted Span of Recognition

This means that there is difficulty reading groups of letters, notes, numerals, or words at the same time.

Individuals with such a restriction, known as tunnel reading, lack the capability to move from line to line, to copy, to proofread, to skim, or to speed read.

Having an insufficient span of recognition means that reading books not broken into columns will be hard, and reading hyphenated words that begin on one line and end on the next will also be difficult. When teachers write across the whole chalkboard, they create more of a problem for reading and copying than when they write in short columns. The visual imagery necessary for spelling is nonexistent, and there might be an overdependence on spelling phonetically.

One adult, unable to graduate from college because of his tunnel reading, reported that reading was like placing a book on flashcards—one letter per card—then holding up the cards one at a time. He had learned how to get the waiter or waitress in a restaurant to recite the menu. If asked why, he would say, "If I had to read the menu letter by letter we would be here for days."

I cannot read more than one typed letter at a time. The rest of the page is just a bunch of black ants rapidly running around. It is so slow and tiring that I give up after reading a paragraph.

When I look at a word I can read the first three letters. It feels as if my reading is jerky. Move, stop, move. I just cannot increase my speed. I can never finish a test or copy work before it gets erased [from the chalkboard].

I cannot see more than one typed letter at a time. I also see halos of light around most things, including people, objects, words, letters, and pictures.

Lack of Sustained Attention

This is the inability to maintain concentration while doing tasks such as reading, writing, or working on a computer. Individuals with this problem find that they must work to keep words readable. Therefore, they take frequent breaks or do other activities while they regain the stamina or ability to proceed with the reading.

Many people make the assumption that reading is effortless. Therefore, it should be no problem reading for a long period of time, consistently paying attention, working steadily, and understanding the material, right? Wrong! For people with SSS, it takes energy and effort to perceive and process the words. The longer they read, the more difficult it becomes, and they find that eventually they will be unable to continue the task.

I know I read differently from other people. I keep having to stop reading. Sometimes I get up and walk around; other times I just look away for awhile. When I was in school the teacher would punish me whenever I stopped reading.

THE RESULT OF THOSE PROBLEMS?

Reading fatigue! As a result of any of the problems that we have just talked about, some people with SSS experience physical symptoms such as headaches, strain, burning or watery eyes, drowsiness, or excessive tiredness after short periods of reading or writing. Individuals suffering from strain report that to continue reading, they must blink, squint, open their eyes wide, turn their head sideways, or close one eye. They might often change the distance of the reading material from their eyes. Any distortion or background interference can cause reading fatigue. What happens when the distortions stop? Fatigue stops!