

Wellness Design Provides Benefits To Individuals on The Autism Spectrum

Adaptive interior designer Shelly Rosenberg and her special needs son in his room with safe task ... [+] lighting.

Shelly Rosenberg

“Autism is dramatically on the rise, and the prevalence rate has nearly tripled since 2000,” declares Connecticut-based child psychologist and author of *It’s Gonna Be OK: Proven Ways to Reverse Your Child’s Mental Health* Dr. Roseann Capanna-Hodge. “According to the Centers for Disease Control, about one in 44 children has autism,” she adds.

“Having a child with autism can be overwhelming, but making changes to your home spaces to reduce behaviors doesn’t have to be,” she advises, adding that these changes can have a positive impact on behavior.

Dallas area interior designer Shelly Rosenberg knows this first-hand. She is the mother of three special needs children, (with ADHD, autism and Down Syndrome diagnoses), and she specializes in creating adaptive spaces for special needs clients.

“Most people on the autism spectrum have challenges with sensory integration and self-regulation. This can look like overwhelm, melt-downs, aggression, excessive and repetitive movement, or even complete shutdown,” she explains, and these can be addressed with environmental adjustments. “In adaptive home design, I decipher what is needed – additions and/or subtractions – and go from there to balance their environment.”

Space Planning

The bedroom’s swing, layered lighting and biophilic elements support autism-related sensory needs.

(Designer) Shelly Rosenberg / (Photographer) Danny Plassick

For a hyper-sensitive client prone to sensory overload, Rosenberg suggests some bedroom ideas, based on her own experience with her daughter: “Visual harmony is necessary. I decreased the number of physical pieces of furniture and accessories a typical room might have. Only a low, platform bed (balance can be an issue, making these kids accident-prone), one nightstand, one table/desk lamp and a natural wood bookshelf. The walls are a plain, soft grey as are the window treatments, so there are no jarring patterns or contrasts. Fabrics and bedding could be

texturally interesting, but nothing remotely scratchy or itchy! Toys or clutter is contained or hidden in the closet with that door closed.”

For the hypo-sensitive client who needs stimulation, their environment should be designed to include the right level for that individual. (Isolation during the pandemic has been an extra challenge for a hypo-sensitive child, Rosenberg observes from her son’s experience.)

“For similar clients, I advise solutions that offset the deficit in sensory input. Think buying a mini-trampoline, a ceiling or door-frame mounted swing, portable ball pits, gym mats to act as crash-pads for wrestling/jumping/exercising, swivel chairs or stools for spinning, pillow fights, sensory tables with marbles, kinetic sand or Legos, or frequent outdoor visits during the day. All of these address sensory needs.” For someone doing distance learning, the ability to move between computer sessions is especially important, she advises.

Lighting and Temperature

This bathroom features human centric (or circadian) lighting and nature views beyond.

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“Light control is paramount,” Rosenberg declares. “Layers of light are preferable for utmost control for the user. Electrical lighting might include overhead cans, a lamp and a dim nightlight. One very useful hack is to add a dimmer switch to the overheads. Another is to make sure all bulbs match *and* are the preferred temperature. Hyper-sensitive kids can see if one light is bright blue in temperature and one is a dull yellow.”

Rosenberg’s daughter is hyper-sensitive, she shares, and wanted only natural light when possible. “At sunset however, she needed low-wattage, full-color-spectrum bulbs, mimicking daylight for tasks, and preferred a pink or red bulb in her lamp to signify evening light to her brain before bedtime.”

Lighting adjustment of this kind can be achieved with automation-based human centric or circadian lighting, a feature Massachusetts-based technology integrator Jen Mallett suggests to her clients on the spectrum.

“While everyone can benefit from the convenience of smart home technology, we have found that clients with autism benefit more directly from the wellness capabilities technology can enable.” Smart thermostats also make spaces more comfortable and healthier for clients, she notes.

Window Coverings and Views

Blackout window coverings help regulate light to address sensory needs for individuals on the ... [+] spectrum.

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“Slatted blinds can create patterns on the walls that can be distracting or irritating, so those might be removed,” Rosenberg advises. She has specified drapery sheers paired with blackout panels to manage light and views instead.

Mallett has found that automated shades can be helpful. They add to a sense of privacy and make it easier to control windows that are difficult to reach, reducing frustration and potential falls.

“Even with autism, humans respond positively to nature and natural elements used inside.” Rosenberg’s daughter chose her bedroom based on its view to the trees beyond her window, she recalls, adding, “She also requested a pastel mural of Japanese cherry tree branches for the wall behind her bed. This yearning for natural patterns is a universal principle of biophilia that I often incorporate into clients’ spaces; just make sure to ascertain which patterns appeal to each client.”

“Being out in nature has proven to lower blood pressure and promote a calm state of mind,” Mallett observes, but not everyone has that special access. If a home lacks nature views – and many do, especially in urban settings – these can be created with technology. “A wellness scene can be programmed to queue up nature sounds, forest visuals and lighting to provide an indoor forest bathing experience,” the technologist says. “Specialized automation controlling lighting, sound and video can create a serene or energizing environment, depending upon the need of the moment for the individual,” she adds.

Noise Control

The soft rug provides a therapy area and improved acoustics.

(Designer) Shelly Rosenberg / (Photographer) Danny Piassick

“Household noises can be auditory issues,” Rosenberg comments. “For younger children, I include an adjustable sound machine to create a preferable white noise. Sometimes individual irritants must be addressed, like the sound of air coming through an HVAC vent; if a whistling or rattling is detected, we can adjust it or close it all together. Any sound buffers can help like thicker rugs, draft-blockers under doorways or even attractive felt acoustical tiles on the walls.”

Shared Spaces

A gathering room with a separate retreat can be helpful to individuals on the spectrum.

Photo Courtesy of Designer: Suzan Wemlinger of Suzan J Designs/Photographer: Doug Edmunds // Wellness by Design (Tiller Press, 2020, © J. Gold)

“Family rooms are places where multiple types of people relate to each other, so I design with flexibility in mind,” Rosenberg says. “Create an area where family members might sit together to play games or visit. Then design spots where several people can hang out independently, while still in the same room. Furniture can float in a room, but some might need a lounging area where their back is sheltered against a wall or partition. If a home isn’t naturally flexible or easy to amend for a person on the autism spectrum, I’ll design a tiny *sensory space* where that person can ‘check out’ to regulate their own nervous system.”

Additional Planning Considerations

Smart home technology can monitor and manage indoor air quality.

Photo Courtesy of Designer: Suzan Wemlinger of Suzan J Designs/Photographer: Doug Edmunds // Wellness by Design (Tiller Press, 2020, © J. Gold)

There are myriad environmental considerations for someone on the autism spectrum beyond layout, light, temperature and furnishings, the designer comments. “I educate the client about more nuanced sensory considerations like smell and taste,” she notes. These include air and water quality, where improvements are achievable and measurable in terms of reducing air- or water-borne contaminants. This in turn can provide a fresher room and a better drinking experience, as well as reduced exposure to proven risks. “There is no doubt that better health translates to improved mood and self-regulation in many circumstances.” To support these, she offers whole home water filtration or HVAC systems to her clients.

Security is also a concern for clients on the spectrum and their loved ones, Mallett notes. “Wireless sensors on windows, exterior cameras and smart locks provide connection and peace of mind for caregivers without being intrusive.” Fall detection sensors can also alert a family member to a hazard, and sleep mats can provide biometrics.

Final Thoughts

Autistic boy looks through picture window at trees outside.

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“When it comes to children with autism, every area of their home environment can be improved to support the physical, behavioral, communication, and mental health needs of the child and family,”

Capanna-Hodge comments. “Children with autism need to feel safe and comfortable and it should be coupled with a lot of predictability in the environment and routines. Giving kids with ASD environmental resources to support their sensory sensitivity and rigid behaviors can go a long way in calming the brain and behavior, which improves learning, attention, and communication.”

Source: [Wellness Design Provides Benefits To Individuals on The Autism Spectrum](#)