

[PEOPLE CHATTERING]

CATHY WURZER: Oh, the state fair is a tremendous spectacle. You know that-- live music, midway rides, jostling crowds, parades, carnival lights, and the powerful aroma of greasy food and livestock barns. It's a lot to take in. For folks with autism or who are especially sensitive to a lot of noise and stimulation, the state fair can be sometimes a little too much.

Jillian Nelson is a Community Resource and Policy Advocate with the Autism Society of Minnesota. She's here to talk about strategies to find places of calm at the fair. Hey, Jillian. How are you?

JILLIAN NELSON: Hi, Cathy. I'm great. Thank you so much for having us with you today.

CATHY WURZER: Absolutely. Thank you. What's it like attending the state fair for someone with sensory sensitivities?

JILLIAN NELSON: Oh, that's a really hard thing to describe, Cathy. I think in a nutshell, the best way to describe it is, a lot. People with sensory sensitivities, and I'm an autistic adult myself, we experience everything on a much larger scale.

So other people might be able to walk through the fair and maybe tune out the conversation next to them or the sounds of the generators behind a booth, for someone with autism, they're going to experience all of those things at full volume. And then add in all of the visual stuff, and all of the jostling, and the heat, and the sounds, and the smells, and it's a lot. But it's also an amazing place to visit. So sometimes, we have to find ways to navigate a lot.

CATHY WURZER: And we should also say this is true too not only of people with autism, but folks with PTSD, anxiety. That can be really difficult too.

JILLIAN NELSON: Yeah, there's a wide range of diagnoses-- we call them neurodiverse people-- That can experience the sensory world in a little bit different way. It's definitely not limited to autism. There's a lot of members of our community that can be very overwhelmed by all that sensory experience.

CATHY WURZER: I'm betting rather than deal with this, they probably just decide not to go to the fair.

JILLIAN NELSON: Yeah, that's one of the challenges. That's why it's been so exciting to see a lot of conversations around accessibility and goals at the fair around accessibility to make sure that it can really be an inclusive place. Because just because something is hard and we have to do it a little bit differently doesn't mean that we shouldn't get to experience the same magic that is the Minnesota State Fair as every other Minnesotan.

CATHY WURZER: How accessible is the fair for folks with sensory sensitivities? And I ask that because you look around the fair, you see a lot of folks on scooters and there are curb cuts-- there are accessibility for folks with physical disabilities. So how about those for neurodivergent individuals?

JILLIAN NELSON: We're starting to make some changes. Last year was the first year that there was a sensory-friendly space on the state fairgrounds, with this being sponsored by Minnesota's therapy group Frazier. But we still have a long way to go.

Right now, other than that small space in the fair, it mostly depends on people with sensory needs to do the planning for themselves and come prepared to support themselves throughout the fair, though it is incredibly great to know that there is that space to have a break. The other really neat thing that the fair has done is they've created an accessibility guide that offers some tips and tools for people so that you can prepare for what to expect at the fair.

And that knowledge and information is half the need for being able to accommodate yourself on the fairgrounds to know what to expect coming in.

CATHY WURZER: So for folks who don't know about the Frazier sensory building, is that the place that's just south of the home improvement building on Cosgrove?

JILLIAN NELSON: It's right across from the education building.

CATHY WURZER: Tell me what's in that building.

JILLIAN NELSON: There's a lot of different things in the building. They have some quiet area where there's beanbags, and swings, and pillows, and a place where you can just disconnect from everything in the fair and enjoy some solitude. And they also have some sensory tools for children in there, for individuals that might need a little more directed sensory inputs.

They have the sensory walls. They have this fantastic light-up water tube. And then my personal favorite in there is the giant life size, full adult sized pin art table, where you can push yourself in and get that whole imprint of your body. It's also just a really neat sensory experience.

CATHY WURZER: Are the needs different for kids versus adults?

JILLIAN NELSON: Needs for kids and adults can definitely be different. As a kid, chances are if you're at the fair, I hope you have an adult with you that's there to support your needs. Also, society tends to be a little bit more understanding when a kid's having a hard time.

No one looks at a four-year-old that's crying in the middle of Midway and says, wow, maybe something's really wrong with them. Maybe we should call the EMT. That doesn't happen with children. We just assume that a child's having a rough day and maybe we'll give that family some space, maybe they need offer of a quieter space.

But it's easier for kids to navigate that, because they have a support team and they also have an understanding that kids fall apart. When you're an adult and you're falling apart in the Midway, you don't always get that same understanding. You also don't necessarily have your two parents there to take care of you. So you really are a little bit more dependent on how you can support yourself. It's kind of one of those things where the demands just get a little bit bigger for adults than they do for children.

CATHY WURZER: Let me ask you about, then, help for adults, and kids for that matter. I noted I have a friend who has several autistic kids, and she was at the fair with me on Friday. And they showed up. And they had earplugs and noise-canceling headphones on, which really seemed to help. Does that ring true to you? And do you have other ideas for folks who might want to bring something with them to have a better experience at the fair?

JILLIAN NELSON: Oh, absolutely, Cathy. I don't set foot in the state fairgrounds without my noise-canceling headphones. I also recommend having other things. Like, I usually have a backpack that has some fidgets or some sensory tools-- so things I know that are going to provide me a comforting option.

I usually also bring something to keep myself cool, whether it's ice water, or a cooling scarf, or a handheld fan. I usually also have other things, like I keep a spare pair of shoes in my backpack because I know physical discomfort is something that can really throw the rest of my sensory stuff into whack.

So I'll have different pairs of shoes. So when my feet hurt, I can change into another pair of shoes and give my feet a little bit of a different experience. It's also really just knowing the space and knowing where I can find quiet.

I never thought I'd be a person that would regularly schedule rodeo and calf showing events into my state fairgrounds time. But now, I regularly spend time in the Coliseum, because it's usually a little bit cooler and a little bit quieter. It means that I regularly know where I can find other quiet spaces and places where the crowds might not be so big so that I can give myself that break and that space to use tools that might help me be a little bit calmer so I can go out and do the more crazy stuff, like roam the midway or wait in the really, really long line to get a slice of that dill pickle pizza.

CATHY WURZER: By the way, do you have a buddy with you that you take and go around the fair together? Does that help?

JILLIAN NELSON: I do. I always show up at the fare with a team. So whether it's one of my partners or whether it's a friend-- to make sure that there's someone there that knows about my different support needs. I was at the fair on Friday representing the Autism Society with the Council on Disability, and I went to get some cheese on a stick with one of my colleagues.

And him and his wife were absolutely fantastic in making sure that I had the support in moving through a really crowded fair-- people on each side of me so I didn't get jostled and bumped around as much. So it's really just about going to the fair with people that really understand your access needs and are willing and enthusiastic about supporting you to make sure that you have a great visit to the fair.

CATHY WURZER: Say, before you go, I'm wondering, Jillian, what else can the fair do to make its offerings more inclusive in the future?

JILLIAN NELSON: I would love to see the fair in the future really focus a little bit more on planning for adults with disabilities like autism. We have some great features out there for kids, and most autistic adults have learned how to adapt kid accessibility to work for them. But when we plan for adults-- like here at the Autism Society, we run an autistic community summit every September.

And it's a place where we plan for autistic adults by autistic adults. And when you bring them together in a place that is intentional for them, they thrive, and they blossom, and they bloom, and they create this beautiful community. And that is what inclusion and accessibility is about is feeling welcome in a space.

So I would love to see the fair move forward with planning more for adults with disabilities like autism or PTSD. And I'd also really love to see some more on-call accessibility. Twin Cities Pride has this great feature where if you have an accessibility request, you can text. And they have a trained accessibility team that will come out and support whatever accessibility need you have.

And I would love to see the Minnesota State Fair have that-- not just for people with disabilities like autism, but for people with all types of disabilities. Because maybe there's a place where the curb cut's being blocked or there's a need for a sign language interpreter. And really being able to communicate in real time with an organization like the fair about accessibility needs would be absolutely fantastic.

CATHY WURZER: All right. Jillian, I really appreciate the conversation. I enjoyed it so much. Thank you and I hope you enjoy the fair.

JILLIAN NELSON: I'll be back out there tomorrow. And I'm looking forward to trying a few new foods and checking out some great animals.

CATHY WURZER: All right. Thanks, Jillian. Take care.

JILLIAN NELSON: Have a great day.

CATHY WURZER: You too. That's Jillian Nelson. She's a Community Resource and Policy Advocate for the Autism Society of Minnesota. You can find more information on her organization at AUSM.org. You can also find a state fair accessibility guide at MNStatefair.org.