



2026 INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

SPEAKER

Amaal J. Starling,
MD, FAHS, FAAN

TITLE & ORGANIZATION

Neurologist
Mayo Clinic, Arizona

TOPIC

Is Migraine a Sensory Processing Disorder?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Migraine is a disease of sensory integration, affecting not just pain states but sight, sound, smell, motion, and internal body awareness.
- A habituation deficit prevents the migraine brain from filtering out mundane environmental stimuli, leading to sensory overload.
- The pain matrix in the brain functions like a muscle: it is strengthened by frequent, untreated attacks, leading to chronification and central sensitization.
- Allodynia (pain from light touch) is a clinical indicator that the brain has reached a state of central sensitization, requiring specific treatment strategies.
- Total avoidance of sensory triggers can increase sensory "gain," making the brain more sensitive over time.

KEY TREATMENTS

- Biofeedback
- CGRP inhibitors
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Mindfulness
- Physical therapy
- SEEDS (sleep, exercise, eating, diet, stress management)
- Systemic desensitization

NOTABLE QUOTES

"Migraine is real. Migraine is a genetic, neurologic disease that results in abnormal sensory processing in the brain."

"I empower my patients to think about migraine as a threshold disease They have control to modulate some of those factors."

PRACTICAL STEPS

- Identify allodynia by noticing if everyday touch, like brushing hair, wearing glasses, or contact with clothing, becomes painful and discuss it with a specialist.
- Practice controlled exposure by working with a professional on gradual desensitization to light or sound instead of avoiding triggers completely.
- Optimize exercise with recumbent cycling or aquatic activities to stay active without triggering migraines.
- Implement biofeedback using boxed breathing or paced respiration to manage sensory overload.
- Prioritize stability by keeping consistent sleep, meals, and hydration, especially during stress or weather changes.