

Sensory Approaches in Mental Health

Mental Health Occupational Therapy Sensory Approaches Clinical Group

What are Sensory Approaches?

Sensory approaches are a variety of therapeutic strategies involving the senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, vestibular & proprioception). By promoting a person's ability to regulate their emotions in healthy and adaptive ways, sensory approaches have been shown to alter levels of alertness and relieve anxiety and distress.



How do Sensory Approaches work?

Sensory approaches work at the level of the brain stem, limbic system & cerebellum. When a person is emotionally overwhelmed they cannot engage the higher levels of their brain, responsible for reasoning and planning. Sensory approaches help people to self-regulate by targeting the lower brain and working up. Through organising and regulating the intensity of sensory inputs, sensory strategies are effective even when a person is emotionally distressed.

Benefits:

- Help a person feel calm, soothed, or focussed
- Promote feelings of connection to one's body
- Improve self-management of distress & anxiety
- Increase self-awareness & confidence
- Easy to use at home
- Can often be used anywhere, at any time.

The unique role of Occupational Therapy

Occupational Therapy promotes health and well-being through occupation. Occupational Therapists have a holistic understanding of both the mind and body, and a unique perspective on its connection to occupation and performance. This provides Occupational Therapists' with a valuable lens for informing the application of sensory approaches in a way that supports people to engage in occupations of everyday life.

Strategies:

Sensory approaches include strategies such as;

- Creating a personal sensory kit
- Sensory Groups
- Pet Therapy
- Music Therapy
- Weighted Modalities
- Creating a sensory space at home
- Sensory Routines

Who can benefit from Sensory Approaches?

Sensory approaches may be used when feeling:

- Restless
- Anxious
- Overwhelmed
- Under aroused
- Easily distracted
- Disconnected from the body



What are weighted modalities?

Weighted blankets and other weighted items are used to apply deep pressure to the body. Small plastic pellets are distributed evenly inside the blanket to provide pressure across the body. Other weighted items include vests, cushions, shoulder wraps and stuffed toys. The deep pressure applied by weighted modalities has a calming and grounding effect as it lowers states of arousal. They also tell the brain where our body parts are in space (proprioception) to reduce anxiety and help with symptoms of dissociation. Training is required before applying weighted modalities. Please speak to an OT for morning information on training option.



Sensory Preferences

The way sensations are experienced varies from person to person, including how sensory input is recognised, processed and responded to. Some people experience sensations very intensely, while others may not notice the same stimulation. People have different sensory likes, dislikes and preferences for certain inputs.

For example, someone may enjoy using essential oils to calm, whereas another person may be sensitive to smells and prefer listening to soothing music.

It is important to be aware that some senses, particularly smell, may be strongly linked with memories and act as a powerful trigger. Talk to an OT about how to discover individual preferences and how they might be influencing experiences of different environments.

The 7 Senses

| Sense | Sensory strategy |
|--|--|
| Touch - Light / deep touch, temperature. | Hand cream, cool face washer, spending time with a pet, holding a warm drink, lycra body wrap |
| Hearing - Sound, rhythm, volume. | Singing, listening to music, nature sounds (rainforest, ocean), white noise, silence. |
| Taste - Flavour, oral motor. | Chewing gum, sucking hard boiled candy, strong peppermints, crunching ice, chewing jerky. |
| Smell - Fragrances, intensities | Flowers, essential oils, citrus, lavender, oil diffuser, burning incense, potpourri scented pillows. |
| Sight - Light, colour, moving visuals | Bright light, dimmed light, nature scenes (mountains), slow moving scenes (underwater), colours. |
| Proprioception - Awareness of body in space. | Yoga, Tai chi, light stretching, weighted objects, weighted blankets. |
| Vestibular/movement - Sensation of moving | Walking, rocking chair, reclining / lying down, spinning on a chair, sitting on exercise ball. |

Acknowledgments to:

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