

Making Sense of Your Senses!



What are our senses and what do they do?

Our senses are the systems that our body has that give us information about ourselves and the world, so that we can go about our day-to-day lives. They include...

- Vision
- Hearing
- Smell
- Taste
- Touch
- Vestibular - (helps with balance and movement)
- Proprioception – (tells your body where it is without looking)
- Interoception – (internal messages like hunger, temperature, pain)

We use these senses all of the time. Without our senses, we would struggle to interact with the world.



We receive information via our senses and then our brain figures out what to do with this information. Sometimes, this gets figured out just fine....We can make sense of the things that we see, we can move as we need to, we can enjoy tastes and smells, and so on. However, sometimes, things don't work quite as smoothly!

What happens when things don't work so smoothly?

Your senses are under-responsive or under-stimulated...

Sometimes, we can't seem to get enough from our bodies and the world around us to be able to stay calm and alert. You might find yourself feeling tired and zoning-out. You might not register someone calling your name, even if they are in the same room as you!



Your senses are over-responsive or over-stimulated...

You might find that your sensory system goes on 'high alert' and your senses are super-sensitive. For example, noises might hurt your ears, your clothes might seem really scratchy, or you might find the bright sunshine makes your eyes ache. Our senses are especially sensitive when we are stressed or anxious. All these heightened sensations can then make you feel worse and more stressed-out and it can be a vicious circle. You may end up feeling totally overwhelmed. Or your body may even respond to this by going into 'shut-down' mode and becoming totally 'zoned-out'.



Your senses are a bit of everything...

Most probably, you will be a mixture of these things. You may find some senses seem over-responsive and some may seem under-responsive. Your sensory needs might change throughout the day. Depending on where you are, what you are doing or who you are with, you may be under-stimulated or over-stimulated. And you may well feel quite different from one day to the next in relation to how your senses are presenting.



Seeking Sensations...

Your body might respond to its sensory state by seeking sensations to try and help you feel more regulated. For example, if you are under-stimulated, you may feel the need to move more and may struggle to sit still, or you may have the urge to make funny or loud noises. If you are feeling over-whelmed, you might be seeking sensations that have a calming and regulating effect; for example, you might chew your sleeves or bite your fingernails, or you might seek out deep pressure touch, such as a bear hug.



What can you do to help?

SENSORY PREFERENCES

We all have different sensory preferences. For example, 'Marmite'... Love it or hate it!?... it's a sensory preference! Some people love rollercoasters, but others are just left feeling sick! Some people like going to busy, noisy concerts and for some people this is far too overwhelming. For a lot of us, our sensory preferences can change on a day to day basis, depending on things like who we are with, what mood we are in and maybe what else is going on at the time.



You can help to manage your sensory needs by being aware of your own sensory preferences. And reminding yourself that **it's okay to be different from other people**. To help reduce stress in your life, **make choices that suit your own sensory preferences**, where appropriate. For example, if you prefer to wear stretchy or soft clothes, don't feel you have to wear stuff that's tight or scratchy just because other people do, if you don't need to.

However, remember, the more we avoid things, the bigger deal they can become and the less chance our minds and bodies will have to get used to it. For things that are **important in your everyday life**, keeping doing them can help you to learn how to manage them. Avoiding situations can sometimes make them worse in the long run. But it's really important that when you do these things, you have strategies in place to make them bearable.

Try out the following ideas to help you to manage your sensory needs...

SQUASHES AND MOVEMENT!

Deep-pressure touch can help us to regulate our systems. And linear vestibular movement, i.e. back and forth or up and down, can also help. **Build this into your daily routine** to help you to stay regulated, and feel calm and alert.

Check out the videos on the Sensory Service page of the Sheffield Children's Hospital website that show you some really easy ways of how to do this!

Visit: www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/sensory



EXERCISE

Regular heavy physical work and exercise is **really important** to help our sensory systems stay on track. It's also brilliant for stress-busting! Make sure you try and do this EVERY DAY.



VISUAL TIME-TABLE

You might feel that your routine doesn't change much on a day-to-day basis, so why bother with a time-table. However, having our time planned out in a visual way is a really good way to help keep us calm, which will help prevent your senses from going into 'over-responsive' mode. Even if you have a good understanding of your daily routine, seeing it mapped out clearly can still help to reduce anxiety.

You could make a wall-planner with some simple pictures or photos that you can stick up. Or try an app for your phone or tablet; (search your app store for 'Visual Timetable' or 'Visual Schedule').



END-POINTS AND EXITS

For activities that you find stressful or difficult, make sure that you have clear end-points. For example, if you can't stand the feeling of having your hair-brushed, plan that you will do 5 'brushes' and then it's done, (even if your hair is still a bit untidy)! Or if you are going to a shopping centre, plan in advance which shops you are going to and in what order, so that you know when the shopping trip will end. Knowing when something is going to end reduces anxiety, which is especially important when managing over-responsive senses.

Also, when out and about, plan your exits. Knowing exactly how you can escape a stressful situation helps to reduce anxiety, which helps reduce sensory sensitivities.

SAFE-SPACE

If you ever struggle with feeling stressed out, make sure you have a 'safe-space' that you can retreat to when things get a bit too much. This might be a make-shift den or a small section of your bedroom that is for you only, (no siblings or parents allowed)!!

If possible, it's a place where it's not too noisy and where you don't have lots of clutter or stuff. This is your 'chill out' space.



Sensory Circuits

Completing a Sensory Circuit is a simple way to help keep your sensory system regulated. Try to integrate this into your daily routine.

Choose activities from the following to suit your space and resources, (doing red, green, then blue):

First, do two of the following red activities...

- Bunny-hops x 20
- Jumping beans - (jump forwards with both feet together) x 20
- Frog-jumps - (squat, then jump up as high as you can) x 20
- Jump up and down on a trampoline or trampette x 20

Then, do two of the following green activities...

- Star-jumps x 20
- Throw bean-bags or soft toys at a target, (such as into a laundry basket) x 20
- Blow bubbles - (through a bubble wand) x 8 long blows
- Hopscotch - (you could draw one with chalk outside) x 8 goes
- Skipping with a rope x 20 goes round
- Wall press-ups - (stand facing a wall with your arms out straight in front and palms flat on the wall; bend your arms, bringing your nose to the wall; keep your body straight; return) x 20

Finally, do **one** of the following blue activities, for a few minutes...

- Steam-rollers – using a gym ball, follow the instructions on the gym ball video: www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/sensory .
- Hands-on squashes – follow the instructions on the 'hands on' video: www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/sensory .
- Hot-dogs – lie down and wrap yourself up tightly in an exercise mat, play mat or similar. Ask an adult to slowly squash you with their hands. Spend a few minutes doing this.
- Hedgehogs – sit on an arm-chair, bean-bag or sofa. Curl yourself up into a small ball, crossing your legs and hugging them tightly, with your head resting gently towards your knees. Take slow, steady breaths in and out. Spend a few minutes here.



CIRCUIT COMPLETE!

For more information on Sensory Processing Difficulties, check out our web-page: www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/sensory .