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Sensory Strategies for Self-Regulation, Stress and Calming

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Summary: Life is not always easy, and everyone has times when things get a bit stressful or overwhelming. The good news is that we can purposely use different types of sensory input (e.g. hearing, seeing, taste, touch, etc.) in order to help calm ourselves down.

Introduction

In life, there are good times when we are feeling calm.
There are also challenging times when things feel stressful or overwhelming.
It may be sensory stress, such as if it's too loud, too bright, or there is simply too much going on.
Many of us naturally use a variety of calming and alerting strategies to help us stay calm or get back to feeling calm.
One of the ways that we can self-regulate is by controlling our sensory input (i.e., by modifying what we look at, listen to, touch and taste).
We often do this automatically without even thinking about it.
For example:

When we are bored, we may try to do things to increase our sensory input such as listening to upbeat music, humming to ourselves, moving, fidgeting, or doodling.

When you are feeling “just right” or you are “in the zone,” what you are doing is giving you just the right amount of stimulation, so time passes very quickly.

When we start getting stressed, we may try to distract ourselves with more soothing things such as eating something, taking a break, going for a walk, or listening to music.

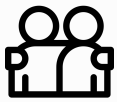
When we are completely overwhelmed, however, we may no longer want any sensory input and may simply want to go off and be left alone until we feel calmer.

Note that:

- Every person is unique and has their own sensory profile, so what works for one person may not work for another. E.g. some people like to move when upset, whereas others might want to listen to music.
- Some people are lucky because their nervous systems are naturally wired for easier self-regulation, or they have had experiences that have taught them how to self-regulate. Other people may have more difficulties, perhaps they are genetically wired differently, or perhaps they have had more challenging life experiences.
- Every person's sensory preference also depends on their state of arousal, so what works for a person at one time, may not work at a different time. E.g. When someone is bored, they might listen to music, but when very stressed out, listening to music may be overwhelming.

What are Sensory Strategies?

Sensory strategies are ways of purposefully using sensory input to make us feel calmer.
Our senses include:

	Vision or visual: What we see
	Hearing or auditory: What we hear
	Olfactory / gustatory: What we smell / taste
	Touch or tactile sense: When we touch or feel something
	Proprioceptive: Where our body is positioned in space when we move (e.g., important for balance)
	Internal senses (AKA interoception): What we sense inside our body such as sensing whether our bowel or bladder is full and sensing whether we are hungry, tired, thirsty, cold, etc.

Sensory Strategies for Different Senses

Vision Sense

Our eyes are responsible for a large amount of the information we take in, and allow us to see if the environment is safe (i.e., calming), dangerous, or stressful.

Calming	Alerting

• Pastel colours • Natural sunlight or dim lighting • Candle • Nature or natural scenery • Fish in an aquarium • Bubble / lava lamps • Lack of clutter	• Bright colours • Artificial or bright lighting • Modern art • Artificial scenery • Video games or TV • Strobe or flashing lights • Messy and cluttered spaces

Hearing Sense

By listening to the sounds around us, we can learn all sorts of things about our environment. We can be alerted to dangers from the sound of a siren, people yelling or screaming. We can be calmed down by hearing the sounds of nature or a person's soft and gentle voice.

Calming	Alerting

• Gentle voices
• Music with a slow beat (less than 60 beats per minute because this is a calm heart rate) such as:
  ◦ Soft, slow, rhythmic music
  ◦ Instrumental or classical music (without vocals)
  ◦ Nature sounds
• Relaxation, meditation CDs
• Whispering (which is why there are so many ASMR whispering videos on the internet)
	• Loud voices, especially yelling
	• Rock music or dance music
	• Music with strong vocals
	• Music with a complex, non-rhythmic beat

Smell Sense

Smell tells us all sorts of information about what is in the environment. For example:

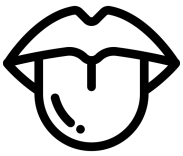
- When a fruit smells good to eat, that tells us it is ripe;
- When something smells foul or rotten, that tells us to stay away from it.

Smells can be calming or alerting. This is why calming smells (such as lavender) are used at bedtime, and why alerting smells (such as citrus and pine) may be helpful in the morning, or are used in workplaces to make workers feel more alert.

Calming smells	Alerting smells
◦ Lavender ◦ Rose ◦ Vanilla	◦ Pine ◦ Citrus ◦ Eucalyptus ◦ Peppermint

Smells can be delivered via scented candles, fragrances, creams or powders, aromatherapy oils, scented pills, etc.

Taste Sense



In order to survive, humans must eat. The ability to taste food helps us determine what foods are safe to eat, and helps us eat the right amounts of different types of foods.

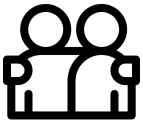
Calming	Alerting
◦ Sweet, sugary, hard candy ◦ Herbal teas (e.g., chamomile) ◦ Chocolate	◦ Tastes which are spicy, sour, or bitter ◦ Citrus ◦ Pickles

Oral Sense

Our oral sense can help us feel more calm or more alert. Chewing gum is interesting, as it helps some people when they are bored, but can also help calm people when they are upset.

Calming	Alerting
◦ Chewing gum • Thick liquid through a straw	• Chewing gum • Crunchy cereal • Raw vegetables • Popcorn • Crushed ice

Touch Sense



Human beings are creatures of touch. Safe, soft touch from a fellow human being can make us feel comfortable and safe, such as a comforting hand on a shoulder or a hug. Other types of touch put us on alert, such as things that feel cold or uncomfortable.
Remember:

- Do make sure you have permission from another person before touching them.
- Do realize that when people are very upset, they may not want to be touched.

Calming	Alerting

◦ Slow, deliberate touch that comes from the front
◦ Bean bag chair
◦ Deep pressure
  ■ Weighted blankets
  ■ Heavy quilt blankets
  ■ Strong hug
  ■ Firm touch on shoulder
  ■ Deep massage
  ■ Weight on the lap (e.g. lap pad, weighted stuffed animal)
◦ Hand fidgets
  ■ Squeezing stress ball
  ■ Playing with Play doh, modelling clay
	• Tickling
	• Light touch
	• Cold room
	• Walking on grass
	• Fiddling with a Koosh ball
	• Holding bag of ice
	• Cool shower
	• Uncomfortable, itchy clothing
	  ◦ Hand fidgets

Movement sense

Human beings need to move. One problem with modern society, however, is that people still spend too much time sitting. Parents know that when their kids get enough movement (especially outside), they are usually calmer. Rhythmic movements can be calming, which is why parents instinctively rock babies and young children to calm them.

Calming	Alerting
◦ Parent holding and rocking a child ◦ Sitting in a rocking chair ◦ Chewing gum ◦ Joint compression, slow stretches ◦ Slow, rhythmic movement and dances ◦ Walking and hiking ◦ Weight lifting ◦ Yoga / Tai Chi / Pilates ◦ Pushing hands together ◦ Pushing against a wall ◦ Chair push ups or shifting weight in chair ◦ Lifting, carrying, pushing things ◦ Doing push ups	• Quick, jerky movements • Fast dancing • Jogging • Aerobic exercise • Kickboxing • Jumping, hopping, skipping • Stamping feet • Clapping hands • Juggling or playing with hacky sack

When and Where to Get Help

Is your child still struggling with self-regulation issues? This may mean several things. Perhaps your child processes sensory input differently than other people, as might happen if a person is overwhelmed from severe stress (past or present) or has sensory processing problems, learning disorders, or other conditions.
Consider doing the following:

- Talk to your child's health care provider such as a family physician or paediatrician.
- Contact an occupational therapist (OT) https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=record&ID=9276

For More Information

CHEO Self-Regulation Program
The various sensory regulation strategies can be used on their own. In more complex situations, however, they can be used as part of a self-regulation program such as with CHEO's Self-Regulation Worksheets.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1jA1M4YqoctsnFBY7ucV7WPyrQ5Keuq7UQeELsAtdOBg/edit
Sensory Connection Program by Karen Moore, OT
http://www.sensoryconnectionprogram.com/

My Sensory Plan

Sense	What gets me more calm?	What gets me more revved up or activated?
Vision	What sights get me calmer?	What sights get me activated?

Hearing	What sounds get me calmer?	What sounds get me more revved up?
Touch	What type of touch gets me calmer?	What type of touch gets me more alert?
Smell	What smells get me calmer?	What smells get me more awake or alert?
Other	Any other things that get me calm?	Any other things that get me more activated?

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Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to you. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your health.

Related Handouts

Related handouts in this series of mental health tips include:

- Self-regulation https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fCz5O9zwKg7AIJvD-gl4JXaqBCrVzfuEvSJrNgxAFHY/edit
- Deep breathing https://docs.google.com/document/d/16mKdQE0ZvpXIsq6UYdGm3LgDtoL0IKZvvHkDskqeUTw/edit
- Grounding Strategies https://docs.google.com/document/d/1T_Zp58Joj4Uu767xl5p8dbKQ_9wW97AUcoLyc4ZNgJk/edit