Sensory Integration in Learning Disabilities

Information for carers

For more information see www.cwp.nhs.uk.

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The information in this leaflet was valid at the date of production June 2016 and is due for review in June 2018

Leaflet code: E-SILD-09-301
What is sensory integration?

Sensory integration is the process by which the brain takes in and interprets information about the body and its surroundings. This information is then used to control and organise the body.

We all receive information in a number of ways and through different senses. This enables us to respond to produce an action or behaviour.

Information can be gathered from the seven following areas:

- Sight
- Hearing
- Taste
- Touch
- Smell
- Movement
- Pressure

What are sensory integration difficulties?

- A sensory integrative difficulty occurs when a person has problems with organising sensory information.

- Individuals can be over or under sensitive or both.

- Difficulties can affect any of the seven senses.

- Sensory messages are not flowing effectively in the brain. This is often displayed through behaviour.

Contact details

The contact details for our community team bases are listed below.

If you have a query or any questions about the information in this leaflet please contact the occupational therapist at the community team base nearest to you.

Wirral  Ashton House
Address: 26 Village Road, Oxton, Wirral, CH43 5SR
Tel: 0151 488 8100

Cheshire West   Eastway
Address: Countess of Chester Health Park, Liverpool Road, Chester CH2 1BQ
Tel: 01244 397 222

Cheshire West (Vale Royal)  Wyvern House
Address: Wyvern House, The Drumber, Winsford, Cheshire, CW7 1AH
Tel: 01606 288850

Cheshire East (South Cheshire)  Stalbridge Road Clinic
Address: 54 Stalbridge Road, Crewe, Cheshire CW2 7LP
Tel: 01270 656 335

Cheshire East   Rosemount Lodge
Address: Chester Road, Macclesfield, Cheshire, SK11 8QA
Tel: 01625 509 031
Fax: 01625 509 034
What occupational therapists can do

An Occupational Therapist can carry out an assessment to identify if a person’s difficulties are linked to their sensory processing needs.

This will be done by gathering information from people who know the person well and through observing the person in their usual environments and how they engage in activities.

If a person is assessed as having sensory integration difficulties, further work can be carried out, which may include the following:

- Identifying activities that provide the right sensory input
- Providing advice on developing routines to support the person’s sensory needs throughout the day (a sensory diet)
- Providing training and information to those who support the person

Sometimes a combination of things, including a sensory integration problem, may be contributing to a person’s difficulties.

In these cases, joint work can be carried out with relevant professionals, for example, psychology, physiotherapy or speech and language therapy.

When are sensory integration difficulties a problem?

- A person with sensory integration difficulties may get **too much or not enough** stimulation from their environment.

- Many people will develop their own ways of coping with this by behaving in a certain way.

These behaviours can range from:

- Rocking back and forth
- Spinning self or objects
- Mouthing objects
- Picking at skin
- Pinching
- Head banging
- Avoiding touch/hitting out when touched

- Too much stimulation may result in **sensory avoiding** behaviours.

- Not enough stimuli may result in **sensory seeking** behaviours.

- These behaviours become a problem when they interfere with daily life.
Everyday activities can be affected

- **Food and drink**: fussy or messy eater; unable to tolerate some tastes/textures of foods.

- **Self care**: avoids grooming/heavy handed with self care activities.

- **Dressing**: cannot wear some textures, removes clothes, wearing layers of clothing, refuses to undress.

- **Social**: avoids crowds/becomes agitated

- **Travel**: difficulty walking on different surfaces/stairs, becomes agitated when a vehicle stops.

- **Concentration**: easily distractible/unable to complete tasks, concentrates well to the exclusion of other tasks.

- **Other**: rocking, self injury, making constant sounds.

How occupational therapists can help

- Occupational therapists help by integrating the senses through a controlled use of sensory activities.

- The aim is to enable the individual to feel ‘just right’ by having access to techniques that calm or alert them.

- Occupational therapy intervention attempts to recreate an individual’s own self-modulating behaviour in a more effective manner.

- Occupational therapists can also advise on changing the person’s environment.