The Sensory Modulation Program

Sensory Modulation
One of the essential elements of self-organization includes the way we modulate incoming sensory and motor information within the central nervous system. As we become more aware of the different strategies we tend to use and do to self-organize, in order to functionally engage in meaningful life activities, we become more aware of our unique system tendencies and preferences and of the repertoire of activities used to self-organize. In this way, the relevance of sensory modulation strategies becomes increasingly apparent, particularly when working with individuals experiencing escalating symptoms and among those in dynamic crisis states.

Within the occupational therapy literature, sensory modulation is referred to as the ability to organize and regulate one’s responses to sensory and motor stimulation in a graded and adaptive manner (Bundy, Lane & Murray, 2002). It is explored from both neurophysiologic and behavioral levels of observation.

The classification of sensory modulation for this body of work is used purposely in an attempt to engage in a consistent language for communication, practice, research and classification purposes (Miller & Lane, 2000). However, rather than using a sensory integration frame of reference this author prefers the use of nonlinear dynamics, which embodies the philosophy and dynamics of occupation, occupational therapy and occupational science. Nevertheless, it is necessary to credit occupational therapists who have and many who continue to employ a sensory integration frame of reference, from which the majority of these sensory modulation treatment approaches originated.

Potential Benefits of Sensory Modulation
The following is a list of examples of some of the potential benefits from the use of individualized sensory modulation strategies:

- Increased self-understanding
- Increased ability to self-nurture

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• Increased resilience
• Increased self-esteem
• Increased ability to engage in therapeutic activities
• Increased ability to engage in self-care activities
• Increased ability to engage in meaningful life roles
• Increased ability to engage in social activities
• Increased ability to cope with triggers

**The Sensory Modulation Program**
The *Sensory Modulation Program* was organized to serve as a guide for when beginning to employ sensory modulation concepts and strategies. It was developed in response to the request for such a set of guidelines by many occupational therapists working in various mental healthcare settings and with different populations. It includes the integration of sensory-related assessment tools, integrative therapies, treatment approaches, program and environmental modifications. The *Sensory Modulation Program* is not meant to be used at the exclusion of other assessments or therapeutic activities. Rather, it is to be used to assist in supporting more active engagement in the entire interdisciplinary treatment process.

Sensory modulation approaches are collaborative, meaningful, trauma-informed, recovery focused and sensory supportive. The information throughout this resource manual may be used to begin the use of sensory modulation strategies and in the integration of the *Sensory Modulation Program* across levels of care with modifications specific to age, gender, ability levels, learning needs, symptoms experienced, cultural and spiritual considerations.

**Philosophy of Care**
The use of the sensory modulation program *requires* the use of a strengths-based, person-centered model of care. It is essential to assist each individual in recognizing not only symptom(s) and problem areas but also one’s individual strengths, which are necessary to embrace and follow through with the exploration, practice and integration of sensory modulation approaches into one’s daily life. This is particularly necessary when introducing novel strategies.
**Sensory Modulation Approaches**
Sensory modulation approaches used within the *Sensory Modulation Program* include: assessment tools, sensorimotor activities, sensory modalities, the development and use of a sensory diet, a personalized sensory kit and supportive modifications to the physical environment. Sensory modulation activities are used by occupational therapists to help prepare for and/or to maintain the ability to actively engage in meaningful life roles and activities.

Examples of sensory modulation techniques include some of the following:
- Standardized assessment tools
- Use of sensory modulation checklists
- Grounding activities
- Orienting/alerting activities
- Relaxation/calming activities
- Self-nurturing activities
- Self-soothing activities
- Distracting activities
- Strategies for identifying and coping with triggers
- Environmental modifications

The sensory modulation approaches used within the *Sensory Modulation Program* may be used as part of the occupational therapy assessment process and/or following the assessment of each individual’s occupational profile (identification of system-wide tendencies, preferences and patterns).

**Assessment**
A comprehensive occupational therapy assessment affords the ability to offer the specific sensory modulation approaches appropriate to each individual’s needs, treatment goals and interests. Further, it provides the opportunity to explore whether other forms of sensory dysfunction may exist. Following the assessment process and the co-creation and prioritization of therapeutic treatment goals with each consumer, some of the following sensory modulation activities may be used when working toward achieving one’s sensory modulation...
goals:

• **Assessment tool examples:**
  - Adolescent/Adult Sensory Profile (Dunn & Brown)
  - Sensory-Integration Inventory-Revised (Reisman & Hanschu)
  - Developmental Test of Visual Perception (Hammill, Pearson, & Voress)
  - Sensory Modulation Screening Tool (Champagne)
  - Assorted Sensory Checklists (OTA Watertown)
  - Assorted Sensory Diet Checklists

• **Sensorimotor activities:**
  - Sensorimotor group (Mildred Ross) or Sensory connection group (Karen Moore)
  - Exercise/yoga
  - Creation of a personalized sensory kit
  - Journaling
  - Taking a hot shower/bath

• **Sensory modalities:**
  - Weighted blanket
  - Weighted vest
  - Music Therapy
  - Sound therapy
  - Brushing Techniques
  - Beanbag tapping
  - Aromatherapy
  - Biofeedback
  - Neurofeedback
  - Light therapy
  - Pet therapy

• **Development and active use of a “sensory diet” including:**
  - Prevention strategies
  - Crisis intervention strategies
Personalized sensory kit development
Determine and establish type and amount support necessary to succeed

- **Physical environment modifications:**
  - Sensory room use
  - General milieu enhancements
  - Inpatient/outpatient unit modification
  - Classroom modifications
  - Work space modifications
  - Development of safe sensory modulation “places” for home use

**Learning Needs**

*Before engaging in any therapeutic program* it is important to work with each individual to identify the amount and type of cognitive assistance necessary to support learning and success. Assessment of learning style and cognitive ability is part of the initial assessment process and re-assessment continues throughout the treatment process. This affords the ability to recognize the amount and type of assistance required in order to generalize the information provided to one’s own goals and life situations. This is necessary for understanding the concepts introduced, for applying the information to one’s own situation and needs, and for following through. Any therapeutic program must be meaningful to each individual and assistance is often necessary to support the process of meaning-making, problem solving and follow through.

**The Sensory Modulation Program & Meaningful Recovery Experiences: Consumer Quotes**

- “Using ice is helpful when I have cravings”
- “Ice isn’t intense enough for me...I bite into a lemon”
- “I need to exercise when I am feeling tense”
- “Making things out of clay is very calming”
- “I feel safe under the weighted blanket (20 lbs)”
- “My sensory kit is going to be my sobriety kit”
- “Now I know that I can change the way I feel”
“It is helpful to realize that I have more options”
“Now I know what’s going on with me (sensory defensiveness)”

**Additional Considerations**
The *Sensory Modulation Program’s* learning activities may be explored through group &/or individual sessions. Further, the use of a physical environment that supports the learning of the various treatment activities is optimal. For instance, a sensory room may be optimal for learning new alerting and/or calming strategies while an art room may be more optimal when making sensory kits, aromatherapy creations, and beanbags for use during beanbag tapping or as a fidget and more!

**Language Used**
It may be necessary to use the *Sensory Modulation Program* language or to integrate the Sensory Modulation Program goals into one’s primary treatment program’s language so as not to confuse the individual. It is also possible to use a combination of concepts and terms when appropriate. The language used must support the process of self-exploration and change. Hence, the resource section of the *Sensory Modulation & Environment* manual provides a host of worksheets using terminology/titles from various treatment programs in addition to the *Sensory Modulation Program* to assist in adapting the materials to best meet the varied needs of each consumer.

**Reminder: Guidelines Only**
The *Sensory Modulation Program* goals were created for use as a *guideline only* and not as a rigid protocol or set of rules. Change is a very dynamic process and people come into therapy with different life experiences and may or may not have similar problem areas, needs or starting points. Hence, the role of the therapist is one of a facilitator of self-awareness, problem solving, strategy identification, planning, practice and ongoing self-reflection. Thus, the therapist is a facilitator of self-organization and positive change through the use of collaborative therapeutic exchanges (the ongoing process of individualized assessment and treatment).

**Where to Begin?**

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It is often helpful to begin by exploring what each individual identifies as being generally calming and alerting and when they might use each type of strategy. This may then be enhanced by considering ideas within the different sensory areas and then to exploring the relationship of intensity. This refers to the intensity of the symptoms experienced and the intensity of the kind of stimulation used to calm or alert oneself. Once this is explored comprehensively it is common to create a sensory kit and a sensory diet specific to one’s treatment goals, which includes prevention and crisis intervention strategies.

Sample Sensory Kit: Creating Individualized Sensory Modulation Tools

The picture above shows a sample sensory kit (the theme chosen being a “grounding kit”) and beanbag tapping options. It is important to offer choices of art materials for use when creating sensory kits (assorted paints, collage materials, colored tissues, glitter glaze) and different materials and types of dried beans for stuffing (different fabrics and types of dried beans &/or stuffing supplies).

- **Examples of themes for sensory kits:**
  - Mindfulness kit
  - Sobriety kit
  - Grounding Kit
  - Relaxation kit

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Distress tolerance kit
Self-soothe kit

A Therapist’s Guide to:
The Sensory Modulation Program Goals

Goal #1: Facilitating Awareness
Facilitating the identification of one’s unique tendencies and preferences, and how these patterns influence self-organization

Facilitate the initiation of self-exploration/self-assessment:

- Use of standardized assessment tools
- Use of sensory modulation checklists/questionnaires
- Assist in identifying what is calming
- Assist in identifying what is alerting
- Assist in identifying when to use calming and alerting strategies
- Assist in recognizing the differences in dynamic arousal states supporting various activities (sleeping, learning, relaxing)
- Assist in identifying what supports an optimal dynamic state for different activities
- Assist in engagement in self-rating and self-reflection activities
  - May use self-rating scales
  - Creative writing/journaling
  - Reading related literature
- Begin to explore the concept of intensity
- Begin to explore how one’s tendencies and preferences change when feeling well versus when not feeling well (specific symptoms, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors experienced)
- Begin to explore how one’s tendencies and preferences specifically influence one’s roles & relationships (when feeling well and not feeling well)
- Begin to explore how one’s tendencies and preferences influence self-esteem and ability to self-actualize
- Begin to explore and identify the elements in different physical environments and how these elements influence the ability to self-organize (sensory room Vs. the general unit/milieu)
Goal #2: Self-shaping
Active engagement in the practicing and planning of meaningful sensory modulation activities

Collaborative engagement in therapeutic exchanges that continue to support self-exploration, planning and practicing:

- Engage in experiential opportunities specifically related to problem areas (dissociation, coping with triggers, cognitive distortions, anger management, distress tolerance, etc.)
- Assist in the recognition of the ability to influence and change dynamic arousal states
- Assist to determine strategies that have a positive influence and begin experimenting with those methods
  - Continue self-rating activities
  - Continue self-reflection activities
  - Identify strategies for both prevention and crisis intervention
- Assist in the creation of a “sensory diet” complete with prevention and crisis intervention strategies (build in specific types and amounts of assistance necessary support success)
- Assist in the enhancement of the understanding of intensity: how to expand the ability to influence self-organization through sensory modulation
- Assist in the creation of a sensory kit with a specifically meaningful theme and items that are useful to the individual’s specific goals
- Assist in the planning of integrating sensory modulation “space” considerations to the home environment (specific enhancements to a bedroom, corner of a room, school applications, office considerations, etc.). These enhancements (the development of safe & self-nurturing places) must be specific to each individual’s needs given the purpose of each place (relaxation, learning, work).
• Practice, practice, practice...

Goal #3 Self-regulation & Repertoire Expansion
Through increased awareness and experience of the benefits of meaningful sensory modulation strategies, it is possible and important to continue exploring and incorporating such self-shaping strategies even further into one’s lifestyle.

Collaborative support fostering the continued experience, growth and reflection regarding the benefits of the active use of sensory modulation strategies and the importance of the continued evolution of one’s repertoire:

• Re-assessment using standardized assessment tools and/or non-standardized questionnaires is recommended
• Continue assistance with assessing progress toward personal sensory modulation goals; create new goals when appropriate
• Encourage continued skill enhancement through practice
• Continue to encourage ongoing self-reflection
• Continue assistance with the evolution of one’s sensory diet (to include modifications prevention and crisis intervention strategies)
• Consider and strive for higher level skills
  o Example: mindfulness to meditation
• Explore the benefit(s) and approximate length of time benefit(s) from using specific skills may last and discuss possible ways to enhance benefits
• Explore the ability to use skills to enhance functional performance in different areas/life roles
• Continue encouraging practice, self-rating and self-reflection