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What works for you?

Using sensory strategies to help people cope with challenging situations


This resource is for people who work in mental health, addiction and disability who want some general guidance on how to use sensory strategies to support people during tough times.

How do tough times lead to stress?

Some stressors are a normal and essential part of everyday life (eg meeting new people, or waking up early for school or work). It is natural for people to feel greater levels of stress during more challenging situations, such as the breakup of a relationship, a natural disaster or other adverse event. These situations can be a serious threat to ourselves and the people or things we value in our lives, and we may become really stressed and anxious.

Experiencing too much stress can have a negative impact on our health and wellbeing. For example, we may experience headaches or sore muscles and find it difficult to concentrate or sleep, which in turn creates more stress and anxiety. This can be different for everyone. Some of us may feel agitated or restless and others may feel like they have little or no energy.

This [animated video](#) shows how stress can affect our health and wellbeing.



How can we use our senses to reduce stress and improve wellbeing?

The reality of life is there will always be stressful situations. What matters most is how we respond.

Every day we are constantly balancing ourselves using our senses (eg touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste). We may have a warm cup of herbal tea to help us settle down or listen to upbeat music to help us feel energised. This helps us to feel 'just right', 'in the zone', 'in balance' or 'grounded'.

Similarly, sensory strategies involve the mindful use of sensory activities to influence how we want to feel. These activities can help us manage stress, overwhelm and distress during challenging situations. Sensory approaches can be incredibly useful and can be used at any time throughout our whole lives.

General principles for using sensory activities

We all have different sensory responses and preferences. Supporting people to find what makes them feel calm, alert, relaxed, safe or happy is a journey you can do together. You can support people to find and use a variety of sensory activities to help improve their wellbeing.

Sensory activities can be calming or alerting.

Calming sensations are helpful when people are feeling restless, overwhelmed or agitated. These sensations tend to be slow, simple, soft, familiar and remind people of positive things.

Alerting sensations are helpful when people are feeling low energy, flat and tired. These sensations tend to be fast-paced, hard, complex, and unusual or not familiar.

Practical key steps to help people become familiar with using sensory activities

1. **Explore** – Encourage and support people to explore different sensory activities and ask people to describe the experience. For example, how did it feel? Did you like it? Was it calming or alerting?
2. **Practice** – Once people are familiar with their preferred sensory activities, encourage them to use these activities whenever they are feeling stressed.
3. **Reflect** – Remind people to self-reflect each time they use a sensory activity. For example, how did they feel before and after? Did it work in this situation?

People have different sensory preferences. A sensation or activity that is calming or alerting for one person may not work for another person. Exploration is key, as people may not know their preferences themselves.

Consider whether it will be helpful to ask the person if they are interested in exploring cultural activities and think about who could help support you with this.

Many people have experienced trauma, it is important to support the person to feel safe and confident to choose and try new things. Talk to your peers, manager, or supervisor if you feel unsure about anything.

Calming sensations

To improve relaxation and calmness

Alerting sensations

To improve attention and energy

Touch

Deep, strong, firm, pressured touch or warmth

(eg weighted blankets, massages, miri miri or warm baths)

Light, tickly, prickly, squishy touch or stroking

(eg fidget items, cold showers or splashing cold water on the face)

Sight

Soft colours, natural or dim lighting, and simple, peaceful and pleasant images or sceneries

(eg natural landscape pictures or videos, or reading a book)

Bright colours, changing patterns of light, and complex visual images or sceneries

(eg visual puzzles, watching a sports game)

Sound

Soft, slow, simple, melodic and repetitive music or sounds

(eg waiata, karakia, white noise, birds singing, ocean waves, or sounds of taonga puoro/Māori musical instruments)

Offbeat, loud, quick-paced music or sounds

(eg handheld instruments, loud and upbeat music)

Smell

Mild and pleasant smells and fragrances

(eg floral scented baths or candles such as lavender or rose)

Strong smells and unpleasant odours

(eg strong scents such as citrus, peppermint or cinnamon)

Taste

Mild, pleasant and sweet

(eg hot chocolate, herbal tea, soup, oatmeal, applesauce, lollipops or sweet chewing gum)

Strong, unpleasant, spicy, salty, sour, bitter

(eg black coffee, sour candies, hot chillies, pickles, cold popsicles or crunchy foods)

Balance/movement

Slow, regular, and predictable movement

(eg rocking chairs, knitting, raranga harakeke, making poi, walking or pacing barefoot in the dirt, backyard, forest or beach)

Fast, irregular, or unpredictable movement

(eg kapa haka, planting kumara or gardening, cleaning around the house, stretching or jumping)



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