

**Chauncy Hall and NFI MA Affiliates**  
**Sensory Connection Program Training**  
**Westborough, MA**  
**May 4, 2011**

## **Sensory Approaches to Adolescent Treatment**

Chauncy Hall is a residential treatment program for adolescents referred by the MA Department of Mental Health. This full day of training was for their staff as well as staff from other NFI programs throughout the state. The focus of the training was to educate staff about sensory modalities and to make them comfortable in using these sensory activities in a variety of ways including crisis intervention, individual treatment, group treatment and also in the everyday milieu.



### **Sensory Strategies Reflect Recent Research**

Participants learned how to incorporate strategies consistent with the latest research regarding stress responses and the Social Engagement Theory (Stephen Porges) which emphasize helping people to use more evolved strategies of appraisal and communication rather than resorting to patterns of "fight, flight or freeze." This research by Porges and others suggests that when a person is in crisis, care providers should bring the person to a safe place, use a low voice and stimulate neural circuits related to social engagement. This can include strategies of oral motor tools, ball tossing, deep breathing, focusing on textures of clothing, humming and playing or listening to music.

### **Ideas for Implementation of Sensory Strategies**

The training introduced a wide variety of ideas for sensory input that can be incorporated into ongoing treatment practices. These are some of the suggestions:

- Introduce sensory items at community meetings and unit gatherings.
- Offer many opportunities for exercise using gym equipment or things like the Bosu Ball and exercise bands.
- Use games to teach social skills and reinforce the social engagement system. Many new "tailgate games" are available such as toss games and Bocce and Ladder Ball.
- Provide personal sensory kits at admission sending a message that the expectation is that they will have good self-control and that there will be support and tools available to help.

- Assess the environment to make sure that it is comfortable and nurturing and that it feels safe. If “quiet rooms” are being used make sure they send a positive message by being painted with calming colors, having a comfortable place to sit or lie down like a beanbag chair, by including something attractive to look at and by having tools available for self-soothing.

### **Chauncy Hall Exemplifies Adoption of Sensory Approaches**

This was my third time doing a training at Chauncy Hall. They have made great progress in implementing sensory approaches since my first visit in 2007. They have several comfort rooms and a gym on-site. They have acquired a range of sensory equipment; popular items include a vibroacoustic mat, sound machines, a Bosu Ball, a fabulous swing for their common room and slatted stadium seats. They have a trained therapy dog that comes daily from morning until night. Personal helpful strategies are posted on bedroom doorways and they are updated frequently.



Over the past few years there has been an impressive decline in the use of restraints and seclusion at Chauncy Hall due to many factors including the use of sensory modalities, facilitation of coping strategies to avert crisis, education on Trauma Informed Care, as well as changes in the facility culture of care emphasizing a highly individualized strength based program. They deserve accolades for their progressive approaches and openness to new ideas.