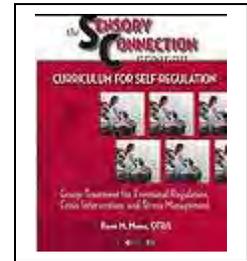


# Sensory Connection Curriculum for Self-Regulation: Group Treatment for Emotional Regulation, Crisis Intervention, and Stress Management

## OVERVIEW

This program is a flexible curriculum for teaching self-regulation skills through the use of sensory strategies and social engagement. This curriculum can be used by occupational therapists and also by psychologists and mental health clinicians trained in the use of sensory modalities.



Throughout the program, the mnemonic “*Pause Connect – Engage*” is used as a way to short circuit impending crisis situations and to facilitate the use of our higher level stress response system rather than the “fight or flight response.” This approach is based on evolving neurological research that emphasizes the need for right brain interventions including empathetic connections, mindful observations, attention to positive sensory stimulation, grounding, centering and restoring rhythm.



A key component of the program is the development of a *Sensory Cart*. Items on the sensory cart are used throughout the program in various ways. Ideally the cart will remain available in the milieu so that items are accessible to explore and to use as needed for self-regulation.

The program is organized into ten sessions. The first session is introductory and teaches some basic self-regulation skills that will serve as a foundation for the remaining sessions. The words “*Pause-Connect-Engage*” cue participants to recognize symptoms of distress early on, to reach out to supports and to engage in helpful strategies. Over the next eight sessions participants learn different self-regulation and health maintenance strategies ranging from the use of specific items on a *Sensory Cart* to non-tool based strategies, focused activities, breathing and mindfulness activities and making a comfort space for relaxation and renewal. As the program unfolds, participants learn to become more aware of their emotional responses and how to control them and they discover their own sensory preferences. In the last session, a *Crisis Intervention Plan* is developed that is based on all of the personal information collected throughout the program, including warning signs, triggers and coping strategies that have proved helpful. This plan should be shared with care providers so they can support the person in the best way possible to utilize helpful strategies and to avoid a crisis situation and the use of drastic measures such as seclusion and restraint.

The *Sensory Connection Self-Regulation Program* is designed to help participants reach the following objectives.

Participants will

- recognize triggers and signs of emotional dysregulation.
- become “in tune” with states of arousal and to know how to make adjustments when necessary.
- develop a repertoire of healthy coping strategies.
- learn ways to manage stress through daily exercise, social engagement, time for relaxation and good sleep habits.
- create a personalized crisis intervention plan.
- feel competent in their ability to self-regulate.

The program can be used as a curriculum for a two week intensive *Sensory Connection Self-Regulation Group* that runs daily, during which all sessions are completed. It could also be spread out over three months with one session being completed each week. Alternatively, topics can be chosen to integrate into other skill building groups. The design of the sessions allows you to pick and choose from the topics according to the needs of your particular clients. The activities will complement inpatient and outpatient groups including groups addressing addiction issues, DBT Groups (Dialectical Behavior Therapy), occupational therapy skill building groups, and cognitive behavioral therapy.

The focus of this self-regulation curriculum is on activities designed for group treatment, although any of the activities presented could be used for individual treatment as well. There may be times when individual work is needed in preparation for group participation. Conversely, there may be times when follow-up individual treatment will be necessary to complete worksheet activities, especially when cognitive support is needed.

### **Who Can Benefit from the Sensory Connection Self-Regulation Curriculum?**

This program is designed to help adults and adolescents learn self-regulation skills. Self-regulation groups based on the program are appropriate for a wide range of settings from veteran’s hospitals to prison systems to state hospital systems. It can be used in acute and long term mental health units, outpatient programs, substance abuse treatment, behavioral programs, and adolescent treatment. The self-soothing and self-care focus of the program topics are extremely pertinent to trauma informed care. Activities from *The Sensory Connection Curriculum for Self-Regulation* will be particularly valuable for partial hospitalization programs and transition groups to help provide clients the skills to maintain health and safety in the community. An additional feature of this program that adds to its versatility is that it is designed to meet the needs of people a wide range of cognitive abilities, which is crucial in the treatment of clients with mental health issues. People with mild cognitive challenges or interfering symptoms will need support to complete the worksheets and will need to review and practice strategies to assure follow-through. This program is not recommended for use in geriatric settings or for people with severe cognitive challenges. The *Sense-ability Group* is a better option for this population.

## How Easy Is It to Implement the Sensory Connection Self-Regulation Curriculum?

This curriculum is designed to be very easy to implement, and it can dovetail easily with other program groups and treatment approaches.

Once clinicians have basic training in sensory modulation treatment, they can read over the background information in this book that is directly related to the curriculum. The information provided gives concrete examples to use in the group sessions and ideas for the education of clients on the senses and self-regulation strategies. Language is used that is non-technical and easily understood by staff as well as clients. This curriculum includes handouts to help leaders as well as over forty handouts, worksheets and posters to help participants learn about self-regulation. It also includes ten games that teach and reinforce skills.

This book includes a CD which will make it easy to prepare all of the needed materials including the handouts, posters and games. Games will be handy to use for other groups and as educational recreational activities to be used in the milieu and for evening programs.

This curriculum has been carefully designed to be as “use friendly” as possible. Clinicians running the program will find it effective, engaging and also fun.

## How Is the CD Used?

The CD that accompanies this curriculum includes all of the games, handouts, posters and worksheets used in the program. Materials for the sessions can be printed directly from the CD. They are organized into Group Sessions to make it easy to keep the materials for that session together in packets called the *Handout, Poster and Game Packets*. Although versions of all of these materials are included in the curriculum book itself, the versions on the CD are in color and the game cards have been enlarged to make them easier to use. There are additional cards for some of the games. There are also game direction cards that are not included in the book itself. Along with the directions, these cards include a description of the activity and the objectives; they can be printed out along with the game cards and kept together in small zip lock bags.



For durability, all posters, game cards and direction cards should be printed on heavy card stock and laminated. Use well marked gallon zip lock bags to keep the materials together for each session. A list of materials for each packet can be found in the supply list at the beginning of each session.