

Regions Hospital, St. Paul Minnesota

Sensory Modulation Approaches to Mental Health Treatment

Full Day Conference for Occupational Therapists at Regions Hospital and Affiliates May, 3rd, 2015

The joy of doing this conference at Regions Hospital was that the therapists there were already implementing sensory modalities and assessments into their programs with great success, and they were hungry for more information to boost their skills and to make their programs even better. Angela Balzarini-Leonhart, who invited me out to St. Paul, is now employed by the hospital as a full time MH/SI consultant. Angie has the great support of her superiors, including Gretchen Prohofsky, who was instrumental as well in making this training possible. They are leading the way for what could be a model of integrated sensory-based treatment in mental health.



Angie, Karen and Gretchen

Regions Hospital Accomplishments

Regions Hospital has made a great commitment by staffing all of their mental health units with occupational therapists. The units include an ICU/Forensic Unit, two units with chronic patients, two short stay units for high functioning patients, a PHP (3 week Partial Hospitalization Program), and a Hero Care units focused on access to services and trauma care.

Remarkable accomplishments of Regions regarding to sensory-based approaches to treatment include:

- ✦ The hiring of Angie as a full time SI/Mental Health Consultant.
- ✦ Excellently designed sensory rooms on every unit.
- ✦ The use of sensory related assessments when sensory consultation is recommended by OTs and other clinicians, doctors and psychiatrists.
- ✦ A system of communicating sensory treatment goals and interventions used with patients so that all therapists can follow-through with treatment.
- ✦ Education of hospital staff on the value of sensory approaches.
- ✦ Development and use of a Power Point Presentation to educate clients in the PHP.
- ✦ Impressive inventory of sensory tools and modalities including a cabinet of weighted lap pads and weighted blankets that are assigned to clients for short interventions or for the duration of their stay.



SCP Conference Pre-Work

Pre-work consultation for the conference focused on these goals:

- ✦ To increase referrals for sensory consultations by developing a pamphlet for physicians, psychiatrists and other clinicians describing symptoms and situations which might indicate that the patient might benefit from additional sensory assessment and treatment.

- ✦ To work towards using the swings that were purchased by the hospital but never incorporated into treatment and to develop guidelines for the swing so therapists can feel comfortable using the swing safely and effectively
- ✦ To expand their repertoire of sensory assessments and to learn how best to integrate them into their sensory consultations.

SCP Conference Highlights

Occupational therapists have an excellent background that prepares them for the safe and effective use of sensory therapies. Information was reviewed on the power and potential of sensory treatment along with safety considerations.

Recent research by Stephen Porges emphasizes our need to “rethink” the stress response system. We now know that there has been an evolution of this system and that as evolved beings our first response to threats should be appraisal and communication. When that doesn’t work we resort to less energy efficient “fight or flight” responses and if that doesn’t work we resort to the old vagal system and “freeze.” (Porges, 2011, 2009, 2008)



Porges research suggests that we should respond to crisis or escalating emotions by bringing a person to a safe place, lowering our voice, encourage vocalizations such as humming or playing or listening to music. Additionally we should stimulate the neural circuits related to social engagement including the muscles of the ears, orienting responses, and suck, swallow, breathe sequences. (Porges, 2011, 2009, 2008)

Sensory evaluation and assessments – what is out there? How do we really use this information for treatment? Formal assessments include the Sensory Profile (Brown and Dunn), Sensory Inventory Revised for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities (Hanchu), The Sensory Defensiveness Screening (Moore), and the newly released Adult/Adolescent Sensory History developed by Teresa May-Benson and her colleagues at the Spiral Foundation. The Allen Cognitive Screening is another well researched tool with many sensory components that gives pertinent information when designing a sensory related treatment program.

There are many sensory implications to the use of restraint and seclusion. We need to be working towards the reduction and eventual elimination of these practices through a culture change and by teaching self-regulation skills and the use of tools for calming and alerting.

Who can benefit from a sensory consultation? Many mental health diagnoses have sensory implications including schizophrenia and PTSD and many behaviors have underlying sensory issues such as sensory seeking behaviors, self-harm, and defensive reactions. Anyone with persistent problems with self-regulation can also benefit from sensory assessment and treatment. Any patient who has been involved in restraint or seclusion should be an automatic referral along with people engaging in persistent self-injury. Other priority patients include those with maladaptive coping strategies, unexplained explosions of emotions, symptoms of sensory defensiveness, and extreme withdrawal or shutdown.

Group treatment can be an effective way for patients to experience the benefits of sensory input and to learn self-regulation strategies in an experiential and fun way. Ideas were presented for integrating the new *Sensory Connection Program: Curriculum for Self-Regulation* into everyday practice and ongoing groups. The mock Sense-ability Group was used as a way for therapists to experience the results of an engaging group process. Making learning fun is the secret to success.

Conference Testimonials

"Awesome, wonderful, it was the "Bee's Knees!"

M.S. Regions Mental Health

"I have been an OT for 25 years and found this conference excellent, insightful, motivating and inspiring. Thank you!!"

J.R. Regions Mental Health

SCP Training Follow-up

There has already been some incredible follow-up to the SCP Conference.

- ✚ Consults have already increased.
- ✚ Therapists are reporting that they are feeling more comfortable with sensory approaches and they are experimenting with treatment ideas from the conference.
- ✚ Additional therapists have volunteered for the hospital Sensory Committee.

One therapist wrote to me about her experience using Idea Cards for Non-Tool Based Sensory Activities from the SCP Curriculum:

"I wanted to let you know how we used your exercise routine in group here--cut the 20 exercises into slips and had people draw and lead them. We made it through 10 in our half hour session, had people tell what they were hugging themselves about with self-hugs and did a progressive group slap/clap pattern, etc. There was a noticeable difference in affect and alertness afterwards for staff and patients--it was a really enjoyable way to get the sensory diet going in the morning. The specific input from each exercise was fun and effective...Thanks!" Peg