

Making Sense of ADHD Relationships: Communication Tools that Work!

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Anita Robertson, LCSW



- Private Practice
- Author of *ADHD & Us: A Couple's Guide to Loving & Living with Adult ADHD*
- ADHD Relationship Bootcamp
- ADHD & Us Live Courses
- www.anitarobertson.com

Carrie Comstock, OTR



- Occupational Therapist
- Published Research
- Certified ADHD Rehabilitation Services Provider
- Private Practice
 - Pediatrics and Adults
 - Kitestrings Pediatric Therapy

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We've Joined Forces

- ADHD-AMAZING
- Collaborate with clients
- Train professionals both online and in-person
- Created free videos and handouts
- Online Trainings

Find us at <https://www.anitarobertson.com/training>



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Objectives

WHAT:

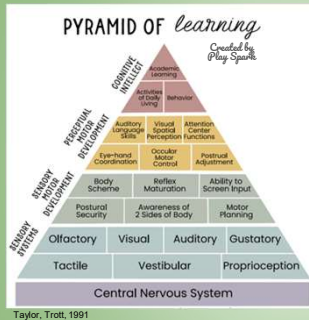
- State three ways how the hidden sensory systems impact ADHD relationships.
- Describe two ADHD relationship communication activities
- Be able to utilize 3 sensory communication tools

FORMAT:

- Snippets of Sensory Science
- Relationship Impact
- Tools
- Practice!

Meet up with us this Friday 6:00ish pm on the Sports Court at the Hyatt Regency

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Consistently Inconsistent

Differences that make ADHD Relationships confusing:

- Neurotransmitters: Dopamine
- Default Mode Network (DMN)
- Sensory Systems

Why using OT tools Make SENSE!

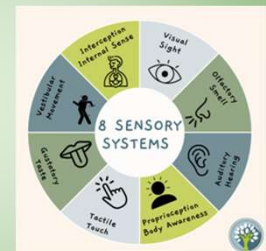
- Trained as a couples counselor: Traditional model doesn't work for ADHD
- Combining tools and couples counseling strategies that work for ADHD Relationships
- Success comes from meeting foundational needs first
 - Lack of resources and research on sensory needs for adults

Why Do We Care About Sensory in ADHD?

Research shows that most people with ADHD have sensory processing differences that impact all aspects of their lives.

Sensory Systems

1. Tactile
2. Taste
3. Vision
4. Olfactory
5. Auditory
6. Proprioception
7. Vestibular
8. Interoception





Auditory System

Over-responsive
Auditory discrimination

How does it show up in ADHD?

- Mishearing what was said
- Not hearing conversations when there is background noise (music, din of conversation, etc.)
- Overwhelmed in loud environments
- Being the loudest in the room
- Difficulties modulating voice volume

*Some people with ADHD are also diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder, which is separate diagnosis



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LYRIC SHOWDOWN

Song: "Blank Space" by Taylor Swift

A: "All the lonely starbucks lovers"

B: "Got a long list of ex-lovers"

Song: Shake it off by Taylor Swift

A: "Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play, play And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, baby I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake, I shake it off

B: If ADHDer's want to play, play, play, play, play And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, baby I'm just gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake, I shake it off

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ADHD Relationships: Auditory

Shows up in relationships as:

- Not "listening"
- Not "remembering"
- Missing big things because they didn't hear it
 - Default of saying yes or responding because of childhood/school conditioning
- Hearing things differently

Story becomes: **They Don't Care!**



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Sensory Tools

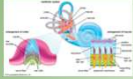
- Noise cancelling devices
 - Loops, bose, airpods, headphones
- Music
- Binaural beats



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Partner Tools

- **Copy That:** Repeat it back
 - Why it Works
 - Barrier
- **Visual Reminders & Visual** step by step break down
 - Set your partner up for success!
 - Use AI to break things down and prioritize



Vestibular System

The movement and balance sense:

- identify what direction you are moving in, your speed and your position against gravity
- works in conjunction with your postural stabilizing muscles, balance, and ocular motor systems

LET'S FEEL IT!

Balance

How does it show up in ADHD?

- Running into people, tripping
- Feeling more regulated after big input activities like roller coasters, rock climbing, surfing, cycling
- Short attention span
- Car sickness
- Needing to move often throughout the day
 - Swaying, Fidgeting, Pacing, Walk/Run/Cycle/Swim/Yoga

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ADHD Relationships: Vestibular & Attention

Relationship impacts

- Moving, shaking leg that is distracting to partner
- Moving/doing (laundry etc) that signals to partner that they are not listening
- Going for the phone for stimulation-disconnecting
- Harder to focus/listen: Miss things that are communicated



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Sensory Tools

- Different seating and movement options
 - Rocking chair, hammock, yoga ball
 - Wiggle seat, chair band
- Yoga, walking, cycling

Partner Tools

- Car Chats
- Double Hammock Chats
- Walk & Talks
- Dance Break

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Proprioception



- Sense of where your body is in space.
- Proprioceptor nerves are in your muscle spindles at joints when the muscle is stretched it sends a signal to your brain of where that body part is in relation to the rest of your body.
- Bilateral coordination, grading force
- Also, believed to release serotonin

LET'S FEEL IT!
Partner Hand Clap

- How does it show up in ADHD**
- Running into people/walls/surfaces
 - Using too much force with people
 - Dropping things
 - "Clumsy"
 - Injury prone

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Relationships: Proprioceptive & Regulation

- Struggles to hear feedback
 - RSD amplifies
 - Challenge to work as a team
- Dysregulation:
 - Intense Feelings
 - Big Reactions
 - EF meltdowns
- Bumps/spills things that create consistent interruptions and delays that impact partner



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Sensory Tools

- *Weighted blanket*
- *Body weight exercises (push-ups, squats, wall-push up)*
- *Resistive fidgets*
- Squeeze hands together
- Chair push-up
- Lift weights
- Theraband

Partner Tools

- Weighted ball toss
- Big Bear Hug
- Massage & Talk

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Interoception



- Internal body signals such as hunger, thirst, urge to toilet, heart rate, sleep cues, etc.
- Internal body signals -> identify body state and emotions -> feel good actions

LET'S FEEL IT!

How does it show up in ADHD

- Forget to eat/drink
- Unsure how they are feeling unless a BIG feeling.
- Feels like going from 0-100
- Don't notice getting sick until really sick
- Very aware of all internal signals and creates more anxiety

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Relationships: Interoception & Feeling

- **Communication Challenges:**
 - Emotions create intimacy
 - Trouble knowing needs
 - Stories that the person doesn't care when they "don't know"
- **Crisis:** 10 out of 10 crisis
 - Partner often feels helpless
 - Challenge in balancing needs
- **Connection:** To receive love or appreciation, must be BIG! Will miss or dismiss subtle connections partner offers.
- **High sensory anxiety (over-responsive):**
 - Avoidance
 - Feels like something is "wrong" in relationship
- **Sex**
- **Sleep:** Irritable, impatient, impacts communication
 - Seems simple, why can't you go to bed early to prioritize us? Before big days especially

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Sensory Tools

- Incorporate big sensation activities if they are having trouble identifying their body state
- Structured mindfulness practice as a support
- Interoception Curriculum,
 - Kelly Mahler, OTR and Interoception Groupie<https://www.kelly-mahler.com/>

Partner Tools

- Partner Breath
- Be specific in your how are you feeling questions
- Use visual aids

Winning Combos!

- Exercise
- Partner yoga
- Spinning Wheel
- Charades
- Dancing
- Swimming
- Coloring/Painting
- Sensory AND the mental health coaching:
- Interest
- Dopamine
- Novelty
- Fun!

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Practice!

Wait we've already been practicing, did you notice? Was it easier for you to stay engaged?

Communication Tools:

- I Statements
- Reflective Listening
- Copy That: Task Challenge

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Sensory Processing & ADHD Research

- The main characteristics of mentorship that provided co-regulation and helped develop self-regulation skills are: fostering positive relationships, guidance based on a similar path, supporting strategy generation, and supporting mentees by setting limits. (Kreider, et. al. 2023)
- Bijlenga et. al. found "sensory hypo- and hypersensitivity may be viewed as key features of adult ADHD, especially in females"
- Kanath et. al. found that ADHD adults score higher in low registration, score higher on sensory over responsivity, and on sensation seeking quadrants of the sensory profile compared to non-ADHD adults.
- Lane and Reynolds research assessed and identified high incidence of physiological markers and reported sensory over responsivity behaviors in children diagnosed with ADHD, leading them to suggest "sensory over-responsivity as a dimension in the diagnostic process for children with ADHD"
- Various studies show higher atypical sensory processing patterns with ADHD
- 74% of ADHD kids had atypical auditory processing in Elena Study
- Under-responsive vestibular processing equated with higher attention problems, along with sensory seeking/hyperactivity behaviors
- Interoception sensory system and sleep are correlated

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Relationship Communication Adapted for Sensory Needs

ADHD Under-responsive ideas:

- Outdoors
- Walk & Talks
- Hammocks
- By a fireplace
- Restaurant/cafe/lounge with:
 - Hanging/rocking chairs or hammocks
- Yoga/Hike/Gym active activity before check-in

ADHD Over-responsive ideas:

- Outdoors
- Identify a peaceful area in your home
- Add any sensory systems that are calming (see handout)
- Scented candles
- Relaxing music
- Safe comfort foods
- Use a straw for your drink

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Questions???

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**Come meet us to geek out and play
with your senses!**
Friday 6ish pm
**Outside on the
Sports Deck
near Ping Pong
Hyatt Regency**

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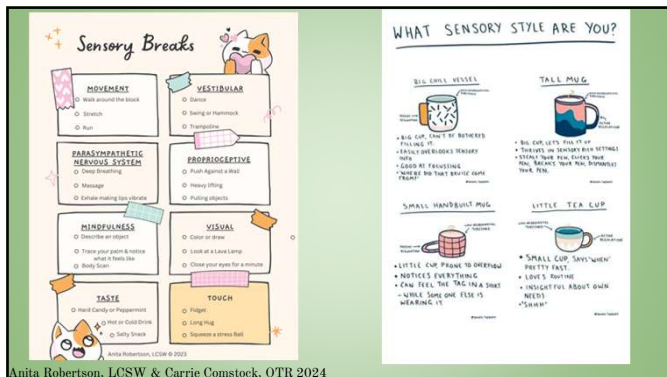
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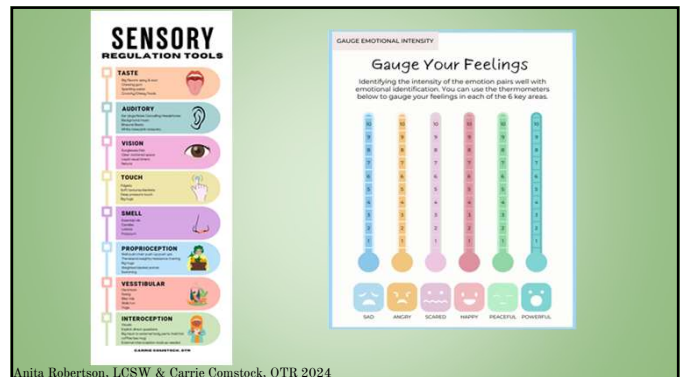
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