

The Mind-Body Connection

Using Your Senses to Positively Impact Your Emotional Wellbeing

We're all familiar with the five senses, as we have come to know them: smell, touch, taste, hearing and sight. Did you know that researchers have identified other senses than these five -- things we may be aware of and experience every day, but have never thought of as a "sense?" Some say we have 7 senses; others have proposed that humans have 9, 18, 21 or even more. Here are a few: *thermoception* (the ability to sense heat and cold), the tongue-twisters of *equilibrioception* (the perception of balance) and

proprioception (the perception of body awareness -- an example is the ability to touch your shoulder blade or knee even if you can't see them). How about the sense of pressure, or itch, or thirst or hunger?

This brings us to the concept of sensory overload. This happens when your brain receives more information from your senses than you are able to process. We've all had experience with this: your mind goes blank, your thinking feels fuzzy, you suddenly feel overwhelmed or confused, and more.

We can use our senses to help us feel better. Perhaps you've even discovered a few techniques that work for you and that you use regularly. Maybe there's a scent that relaxes you or creates happiness or invigorates you when you smell it. Or you have a book that you regularly read (or music that you play) when you want to banish your anxiety and tension.

By deliberately focusing on one sense for a prescribed period of time, we can reduce or eliminate the experience of brain fog. This provides you with the experience of focusing on one thing and letting your other thoughts fall away. Imagine walking into your favorite pizza place or bakery and being swept away (even for a few seconds) by a smell or taste.



For our purposes, we'll stick to examples using the standard five senses. Here are some additional examples:



Sight: enjoying the shape, color, size, or some unique feature of something you see.



Hearing: that sound (or music) you like hearing so much that you shut your eyes (this reduces visual stimuli that may interfere with full enjoyment of what you are listening to).



Smell: smells are handled by the olfactory bulb, which is directly connected to parts of the brain that are involved in memory and emotion. Find a scent that you like and keep it handy. Smells each have their own unique impact on us; find the ones that have a positive impact, whether it is a calming or energizing impact, or if the scent brings you back to a pleasant memory.



Touch: touch is individual, and some types of touches are uncomfortable to some at the same time being enjoyable to others. The very act of thinking about how a pleasant type of touch feels allows you to take a step outside of the constant thoughts in your head and can give you a moment of peace.



Taste: Taste is highly variable from person to person. It's natural for us to want foods that make us feel good, safe, relaxed, comforted, excited or a variety of other positive feelings. Some tastes also have negative associations. Taste is a common way that individuals soothe themselves and can sometimes be problematic in terms of weight gain. In these situations, use of another sense to call up a specific emotion could be considered. In other words, is there another sensory experience that you can substitute for the good feelings that arise from consuming a bowl of chocolate pudding, for example: listening to your favorite song or favorite comedian, or taking a brief walk?

As a way of keeping stress management tools handy when you need them, consider creating a list of those things that reduce stress and lead you to good feelings. Some individuals make a regular practice of taking items that create a sense of relaxation, happiness, or energy along with them when away from home or when facing a stressful situation.

Take a moment to answer the following questions. Some experiences will come immediately to mind. Give yourself a moment to remember some of the more subtle experiences as well.

Self-Inventory:

Name 3 sensory experiences that help you feel *relaxed*.

Name 3 sensory experiences that help you feel *happy*.

Name 3 sensory experiences that help you feel *energized*.

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