



SENSORY PROCESSING, THE ENNEAGRAM, AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS...OH MY!

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@ENNEABLOOMS ON INSTAGRAM

QUESTION: WHY DOES SENSORY PROCESSING MATTER IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS?

ANSWER:

1. The ability to take in and successfully process sensory information is foundational to how we interact with the world. Being able to efficiently regulate the sensory information that surrounds us allows us to be calm, alert, and available.

2. We must successfully integrate the sensory information around us in order to:

- Be aware of our body and participate in physical activity
- Plan and sequence a task
- Have healthy, reciprocal interactions with others
- Control our emotions
- Remember things
- Believe in ourselves
- Pay attention/know what NOT to pay attention to

3. Relationships can help us to regulate or (unfortunately) can contribute to dysregulation!

- Self-regulation: using our own strategies to regulate our own sensory systems
- Co-regulation: when our spouses (or other loved ones) are in a regulated state and therefore able to help us regulate
- Co-dependency: when we rely too much on our spouse (or other loved one)'s presence, thoughts, or feelings to maintain a regulated state

(Adapted from material by: Julie Menanno, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist)

QUESTION: CAN YOU GIVE A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OUR SENSORY SYSTEMS?

ANSWER:

Visual—how we respond to light and interpret visual stimuli

Auditory—how we respond to and interpret sounds

Smell/Taste—how we respond to and interpret odors and flavors

Tactile—how we respond to and interpret touch, texture and temperature

Vestibular—how we respond to and interpret movement and our position in the environment

Proprioceptive—how we respond to and interpret pressure (also referred to as “deep touch”)

Interoception—how we respond to and interpret internal sensations (pain, hunger, thirst)

QUESTION: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DON'T RESPOND PROPERLY?

ANSWER:

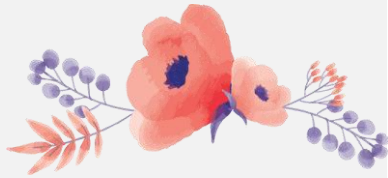
We have a response that doesn't match the stimulus (think: Fight/Flight/Freeze).

Here are three (of many) ways things can go wrong:

1. **Over-response**—we have a higher or longer response than expected

Responses may include:

- Irritability, moodiness, avoidance of certain social settings
- Fear of trying new things
- Freezing instead of responding when over-stimulated
- Frustration toward others who trigger the response (e.g., a child who touches too often, a spouse who chews too loudly, etc.)



A few examples of how this could impact relationships/work life :

- Not being able to handle certain household or human noises
- Not being able to work or focus in a noisy, bright, or crowded environment
- Becoming upset when touched unexpectedly or too often

2. Under-response—we have a lower response or awareness than expected

Responses may include:

- Being quiet or distant
- Difficult to engage or slow to respond (think: “zoning out”)
- Easily fatigued
- Decreased motivation

A few examples of how can this could impact relationships/work life:

- Needing greater amounts of stimulation (e.g., lighting and music) to get moving
- Having trouble/not showing interest in engaging in social interactions
- Not responding when called for or touched

3. Sensory Seeking/Craving—we desire more sensory stimuli than others in a given situation

Responses may include:

- High level of activity may interfere with the task at hand
- May interrupt or attempt to control conversation
- May crave intense touch, seeming overly affectionate
- May be very loud
- May become unhappy when asked to “stop” or “be still”

A few examples of how this could this impact relationships/work life:

- Enjoying extreme sports or needing to always be trying something new
- May jump from one task to another
- May crave intensity, control, and touch with others

HOW CAN WE APPLY THIS TO ENNEAGRAM TEACHING?

The most important element is developing empathy and communication. Our Enneagram type does not necessarily point to a specific sensory profile, but our type will impact how we communicate our needs and our struggles. A gut type (8/9/1) may exhibit anger in response to a sensory trigger. A heart type (2/3/4) may exhibit shame/guilt about how their sensory needs are impacting the relationship. A head type (5/6/7) may show anxiety when a trigger is present. Ultimately, we should have open conversations with those we love about their sensory needs. When we understand each other’s needs, we can co-regulate (rather than judging them for their differences or allowing them to overly depend on us to regulate). When we graciously accept the differences of those we love, we can help them come to a place of healthy self-regulation, too!

CONSULTATION AVAILABLE

Contact me to set up a free 15 minute consultation to discuss your needs and questions. I am available for services regarding both Occupational Therapy (e.g., sensory processing) and the Enneagram.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Resources compiled in this handout are credited to: (1) 10 years of experience working as an Occupational Therapist in the field, specifically with those who experience sensory processing difficulties, anxiety, ADHD, and/or autism, and (2) additional continuing education sensory training I completed with the STAR Institute for Sensory Processing Disorder (www.sensoryhealth.org).