

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Sensory Dysregulation

I cried ALL the time as a kid. At secondary school one of the other pupils confided that a teacher had told their class he 'didn't like teaching me because *"I always looked like I was about to burst into tears"*!

The ease of making my cry fed into a lot of the homophobic bullying I received. I was *effeminate, a girl, I wasn't a real man, I needed to toughen up, take hits like a man, stop being such a cry-baby, or I was a mummy's boy.*

In my twenties, when I realised I was gay, I carried a lot of internalised homophobia. I knew I didn't want to be effeminate or a girl, so I dressed in leather and tried to act butch. I often wonder now if part of my drive to win *"International Mr Leather"* was an attempt to prove the bullies wrong. It might also explain some of the ugly misogyny I've seen on the gay scene.

It's only recently as I explore what it means to be autistic that I've learned about *"sensory dysregulation"*. Kieran Rose has a wonderful way of describing it in his *"Inside of Autism"* training course (<https://theautisticadvocate.com/>). He states that in people whose senses are balanced and working in harmony, it's like a set of cars driving side by side on a multi-lane motorway. When something unexpected happens and the cars have to turn off the road, it's relatively easy to co-ordinate them as they're all working together.

In someone who is autistic or whose senses aren't working in harmony, they tend to have a much spikier *"sensory profile"*. That can be thought of as some cars way up ahead (*e.g. really acute hearing that can't cope with loud noises*) and some cars lagging behind (*e.g. not getting the signal that you're hungry or thirsty until you have a headache*). If that group of cars have to make an unexpected turn there's a lot more effort involved, as some of the cars may have already passed the turning and some are so far behind they can't see it. That's a state of sensory dysregulation.

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That's part of the reason why autistic people love routine and don't like being interrupted in a train of thought or a task (*it's much more effort for us to make a turning*). We might need to take some time changing from one task to another in order to regain sensory regulation.

If the cars on the motorway collide while trying to take the turning, that often shows itself as emotional dysregulation: perhaps tears, anger, frustration, a shutdown or a meltdown.

All of a sudden I see how often I cry not as part of being gay, but as part of sensory dysregulation. That's really blown my mind.

You don't need to be autistic to have sensory processing differences, but one of the signs of autism is that you experience the world in a different way.

If you think your senses aren't working as a team, there are several things you can do:

- 1) You can book a sensory assessment with an occupational therapist
- 2) You can use tools to help, for example noise cancelling headphones to cut out background noise, blackout blinds if you need a dark room, or an app or alarm to remind you to eat
- 3) Engage in activities that help you regulate your senses (*you might already be doing this without realising*). These tend to be activities which are predictable, feel safe and might be repetitive.

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I asked some autistic people how they regulate their senses and the replies included:

- Being with nature/ "walking through trees"/ looking at clouds/ finding bees/ gardening
- Having a pet/ working with animals/ dog walking/ volunteering at an animal rescue
- Being held in a tight embrace/ lying under a weighted blanket
- Cleaning the house/ reordering things: books, CDs, jewellery, furniture...
- Making music/ listening to the same piece of music
- Playing Minecraft or D&D
- Re-watching favourite films
- A hobby that uses your fingers: Lego/ lock picking/ wood whittling/ painting figures/ diamond painting/ hobby crafts

I'm now looking back on the time I've spent at kink events, and wondering how many of those experiences were me trying to regulate my senses. I even said after some scenes: *"thank you – I feel reset!"*

I made a joke about it in my last comedy show: *"I tried all these things – was I just looking for a weighted blanket?!"*

You'll have to excuse me, I'm going out to look for some bees now

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