

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Spatial Awareness

At school I was taught we have five senses: touch, taste, sight, sound and smell. One of the senses we didn't cover was *Proprioception* – knowing where your body is in space.

A lot of the people I work with describe having poor proprioception. One person said *"it's like my brain is trying to operate a human meat puppet and I don't have all the strings."*

It is very common for people who are neurodivergent to have poor proprioception, and it can be worse when you're struggling to get enough sleep, in the flow of a task, experiencing sensory overwhelm or closer to burnout.

Looking back at my school reports I scored badly at physical education because we always played team sports with balls, and I never knew where my hands or feet were. If I tried to join in I was made fun of by other students and teachers, and if I didn't join in I was branded *"stubborn and uncooperative"*. Really couldn't win.

Understanding how spatial awareness affects our lives has helped me with self-acceptance and confidence, but there are other ways it can help too:

SIGNS OF BURNOUT

For some of us it can be hard to tell when we're exhausted or closer to burnout. *(When I'm tired it's as if my brain's damage report machine is faulty.)*

Having less spatial awareness might be one of the ways you, or the people around you, can notice that you're struggling.

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It may be that you hit your elbow walking through a door, or misjudge walking around furniture and bump into it. You might drop things more often, spill drinks, hit your head or fall over.

These can be useful signs to check in and see how you are doing. Do you need to cut back on social obligations, or have more rest?

RESTORING YOURSELF

Giving yourself feedback on where your body is might be a way of restoring yourself, or helping your body reset if you feel dysregulated.

You might find benefit from tight bear hugs, wearing compression clothing or being under a weighted blanket.

If you go for a massage you might prefer a deep tissue massage to being lightly touched.

Some people like being burrito'd in a duvet, or having a partner lie on them.

Several of my clients like wearing hats, and one likes pressing their face against trees.

Lifting weights or kettlebells can also be restorative, giving you feedback on where your body is.

If you have shutdowns or meltdowns then having proprioceptive input (*like a tight embrace*) might be a way of recovering quicker – but we are all different so please ask someone beforehand if this is something they would like you to try.

IMPROVING SLEEP

At home I like to sleep under a couple of extra blankets for weight, and on holiday I might pile some extra clothes on my side of the bed (*temperature depending.*)

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My massage therapist has a velvet bag full of beads that weighs 1kg/ 2.2 lbs. He noted that whenever he rests the bag on my head I fall asleep during the massage. I have one at home now and it's very useful for turning my brain off if I want an afternoon nap: <https://www.boots.com/boots-microwaveable-heat-wrap-10318219> (*I don't heat it up, I just lay it over my head*)

ACCOMMODATIONS

Are there changes you'd like to make as a result of knowing this?

One person wears compression sleeves under their shirt to work.

I use a walking pole if I'm walking through milling crowds, (*e.g. an open air market*), so that my brain can concentrate on my hand gripping the pole.

We've put some pipe insulation foam on door handles and shelves at home where I most often bang my head.

I've also asked my partner to hug me if I'm in shutdown, or to let me know if he hears me say "ow!" because my steering is off.

Working out your spatial awareness needs can be a really useful step if you've discovered you are neurodivergent and don't know what's next.

Please let me know if you have any questions or suggestions you'd like to add.

Best wishes,

John Pendal

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