

My Sensory Tune-Up on Ateachabout

Life 'On The Road' with an OT

By *Rick Ruess*



My name is Rick Ruess. My wife and partner on **Ateachabout** is Diana Henry, MS, OTR/L, FAOTA. We have been living 'on the road' in our Ateachabout RV full-time since February 2000. We have also spent many days in hotels where we have found it necessary to fly or drive long distances to our workshop destinations.

Those of you who have attended one of Diana's presentations over the years know that she is a ***SENSORY SEEKER***; to the max I might add. I, on the other hand, am a *sensory avoider*. This article is about MY sensory preferences and what I do to get my sensory 'tune-up' throughout the day.



As Diana says, "It is not about right or wrong, it is just about who we are." I have heard that there are some people who believe that sensory integration, sensory processing, sensory ...?, whatever you wish to call it, does not exist. What planet are you from? You are either a sensory perfect humanoid (always 100% in tune with all your sensory systems) or you're sensory starved (the battery is dead and your wiring is not connected). I am *not* a therapist and have not done evidence-based research to back up the information in this article. MY evidence is from experiencing life for 55 plus years. It was just good old common sense as I listened to Diana speak about our sensory systems that we are all sensory beings and have sensory preferences. MY 'internal wiring' (while developing in MY mother's womb), MY daily exposure to MY surrounding environment, MY life experiences, as well as many other factors have made me the sensory being that I am today. OK, enough of that! I hope that you got the message.

Before I continue, I wish to add a note to all of you knowledgeable 'therapists' who will be analyzing/diagnosing me as you read on. I have been told that I have some asperger tendencies by a wonderful occupational therapist (OT) who is in my life everyday. Some examples of my quirks are: I line up my stick pretzels in the bag before I eat them. I eat the broken tortilla chips at the bottom of the bag before eating the unbroken chips. When I have a snack of cheese and crackers, I cut the cheese from the block so it fits the size of the crackers, place the sliced cheese on all the crackers, stack the cheese & crackers up in an orderly manner on the plate, and then eat them. I also prefer to keep the foods on my plate separated whenever possible. For those of you who read this and say "that is what I do", I say "bravo, we are special people." For those of you who do not understand, guess what, I don't care, it's your problem not mine.



For me, life is a picture show of continuous snapshots of time. There is no such thing for me as too many pictures. When I want to find something, I look through the slide show in my storage unit (brain) and can see where it was placed by the picture that was taken during the time it was filed. Diana, as a sensory seeker, is always going faster than the speed of light. She is constantly looking for things that she has misplaced, even in our Ateachabout home where space is limited. Almost always, since we are in a small space, I will have watched her actions throughout the day. I will have the snapshot ready to replay when called upon. She will finally break down and ask me, "Have you seen my ... eyeglasses, folder, paper, etc.?" I then tell her exactly where to find what she is looking for and our world is again in harmony.

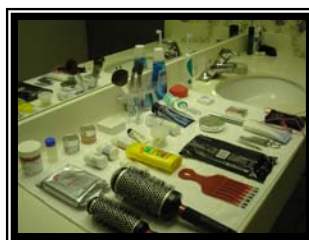
Starting the day with my morning sensory tune-up:

I have developed routines which I like to do whenever possible to help me prepare for the day. Organization is a very important part of everyday. For me, change can be stressful, unless it is planned well ahead of time and I have had time to adjust. It drives me crazy when we have made plans the night before only to find out that the other half wishes to completely change directions in the morning. It sometimes is a challenge for me to adjust on a moment's notice, even if there is an explanation as to why she wishes to make the change.

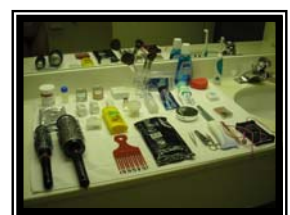
The space in our RV as well as in a hotel room is very compact so we have learned to respect each others' sensory needs. As a sensory avoider, my space is my space. When we are staying at a hotel, I find a corner on the bathroom counter away from the wash basin for my toothbrush, deodorant, contact lens solution and case, and hair brush. I try to keep my things away from the wash basin because I can not stand them to be all wet from the other half splashing water around as if she was in a swimming pool. I try to keep my things separated from her stuff (too many items to list) and 'always' put my things back in the same place. This way I know where my things are the next time I wish to use them.



My Stuff
←



Her Stuff
→



I enjoy an early morning hike or bike ride when at home. The ability to be outdoors and seeing the sun rise is a real sensory treat for me. Diana enjoys being with me, although she also likes going to a fitness center and working out in an aerobic class, which I do not enjoy at all. In a fitness center, the musty odors, smells of chlorine from a pool or shower room, fluorescent lighting, and the various noises from the treadmills and other equipment puts my sensory system on tilt. Being alone on a hike is not a problem, although I do enjoy having company as long as we can enjoy what nature has to offer. Our Ateachabout home has provided us with an opportunity to be in beautiful places year round. We spent this past summer in Flagstaff, AZ. A short walk out the door and I was in a meadow with numerous flowers, a forest of pine trees, or on top of a mountain.



I also enjoy my morning cup of coffee, including the aroma of a fresh brewed pot when at home, and reading the paper in my quiet space before officially starting the day. I attempt to do this everyday, even if we are on the road to do a workshop. Diana has learned not to ‘bug’ me during this time, even though she is ready to engage in a conversation as soon as she wakes up.

Charging up my batteries... Sunflowers getting their sensory tune-up:



On my walk this morning, I found in nature a way to explain what it means to me to have this opportunity. However, I was not really paying a lot of attention since there was just so much going on at the start of the day. The birds singing, ants busy working below my feet, bees pollinating the flowers, hummingbirds buzzing from plant to plant, squirrels collecting seeds and nuts, rabbits nibbling on the grass, deer on the move grazing on their favorite foliage, coyotes searching for a morning meal, and all of the other animals along my path enjoying their morning search for food. And then there were all of the other flowering plants to enjoy as the morning sun rays encompassed their space. There were colors of

blue, red, violet, orange, yellow, green, brown, and white which blanketed the open space below the trees. The eastern slopes of the mountains had the red glow that you get to see only as the sun begins to rise above the horizon. Got the picture!

“It is like a sunflower... searching for the morning sun after a night in darkness.”

I have noticed over the last few weeks that sunflowers were springing up in many of the open areas found in the meadows and forests. Then, I started to notice that the thousands of sunflowers that had popped up over the last few weeks were all waiting for the same thing as I. The morning sun! They were getting their dose of vitamin D, just as I was doing to help get my batteries charged for the day. It was amazing. Every sunflower I could see as I walked the trail was facing towards the rising sun. When I looked at them again on the return trip after the sun had been up for an hour they looked energized, *just like me!*



Staying sensory tuned throughout the day:

After treating myself to my morning sensory tune-up, I am now ready for the work day to begin. Our lifestyle on our Ateachabout is unique. When we are not on the road presenting workshops, we are at an RV park working in our Ateachabout home. When in our Ateachabout home, I start the work day by turning on my computer, reading, printing, and replying to emails which need attention. I update and work on my priority list of projects, plan for upcoming workshops, etc. I always stop for lunch, typically around noon ...“feeding time” for me, and then continue until early evening. During the day, I feel ready to work on whatever task is at hand, however occasionally a nap is called for in the early afternoon. Everything is within a small area so it is easy to take care of any sensory need which arises during the day. Our RV has lots of windows so I get plenty of natural light which I need to keep my batteries charged throughout the day. We are always parked in a nice location with a beautiful visual setting just out the window. When I feel that I need to get up and stretch, I just walk out the door for a short break.

When we are ‘on the road’ to present a workshop and staying in a hotel, my routine is a little different. I get up, take a shower, get dressed, and go down to the breakfast area in the hotel. I get my cup of coffee and grab a paper to read. Then I really enjoy finding a quiet comfy space to read the paper and sip my coffee while waiting for Diana. At the workshop I attempt to find a location for my display tables outside of the presentation room in an area that has natural daylight and a view to the outside. I create a space where my back is by a wall with the tables in front of me like a barrier against attack. I do not mind speaking to participants one on one. I actually enjoy sharing our experiences and stories about our life on the road on Ateachabout. I do not enjoy speaking to a large group of people as Diana does when she is presenting. Upon completion of our workshop, we pack up our materials and try to find a quiet location for dinner. After dinner we return to our hotel to relax for the evening and get a good night’s rest. The next morning, with coffee/tea in hand, we always try to find a nice place to take a walk.

My common sense approach to sensory:

I consider myself to be a sensory ‘machine.’ Diana and I know that I am a sensory avoider and that she is a sensory seeker. Understanding each of our individual sensory preferences has allowed us to be respectful of each others’ sensory needs. Diana, being a sensory ‘guru’, has provided me the sensory environment that I need to have my daily sensory tune-up to keep me humming smoothly.

If you are a sensory avoider like me, having a sensory seeking child in your life can be overwhelming. You may even consider them to have behavior issues or think that giving them drugs is the only solution. Likewise, if you are a sensory seeker, having a child who is a sensory avoider, may cause you to believe that they are unloving because they do not wish to be held or hugged. The goal in sharing my personal sensory experiences is to help parents, caregivers, teachers, and others understand that we are all sensory beings (machines), including their children and students. It is time for me to now tune-out so I can be tuned-up.



Go to www.ateachabout.com

Click on the photo of Diana and I next to our RV to view a PBS documentary

Click on the Ateachabout video to view a short clip of our teaching program



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Henry Occupational Therapy Services, Inc.

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