

Getting Rubbed the Wrong Way: The Complicated  
Relationship Between OCD & Sensory  
Dysregulation

**-Identifying Sensory Dysregulation Issues  
Clinically Significant to OCD and its Treatment-**

Jonathan Hoffman, PhD, ABPP

Neurobehavioral Institute (NBI) & NBI Ranch



# Sensory Dysregulation

- A common but under-discussed aspect of OCD (Stevens, Hoffman, & Hsia, 1998; termed 'sensory phenomena' by Pittenger, Grimaldi, & Stern, 2017)
  - 'Just right' experience
  - Incompleteness
  - 'Urges'
- Part of an OCD comorbidity
  - e.g., Autism, ADHD
- Stressful, triggers, exacerbates, or synergizes with OCD
- Calming or mitigates OCD – distraction, escape, 'safety cue'
  - Induced by a substance
  - A 'happy accident'
  - ...This functionality may be more common in Autism

# Understanding Sensory Dysregulation in OCD

- Sensory Hypersensitivity- Found, per parent report, strong sensory reactions (oral and tactile hypersensitivity) were associated with ritualizing in childhood (Dar, Kahn, & Carmeli, 2012)
- Sensory Over-responsivity (SOR)- excessively intense and/or prolonged behavioral responses to environmental stimuli is common and similar in OCD and Tic disorders (Isaacs et al., 2022); “There is some evidence that individuals with co-occurring symptoms of SOR and OCD experience more severe anxiety than those with symptoms of OCD alone, but most studies employed small numbers of participants” (Van Hulle, Esbensen, & Goldsmith, 2019).
- Pittenger, Christopher, Stephanie J. Grimaldi, and Emily R. Stern (2017) – OCD linked to sensory intolerance and issues screening sensory information/reduced sensory gating (like pain?)
- **Seeking Proxies for Internal States (SPIS) model (Lieberman, Lazarov & Dar, 2023)** Due to diminished access to internal states (e.g., emotions, preferences, motivations in OCD, proxies are sought (e.g., “fixed rules and rituals, observable behavior, and indexes”) – **including sensory information?**

# Seeking Proxies for Internal States & Possible Relationship to 'Intrusive Thoughts' and Other OCD Symptoms

- **How** can a thought be intrusive?
- If a thought is EXPERIENCED as intrusive, the SPIS concept may have explanatory, and possibly mechanism, relevance
- Let's talk about synesthesia
  - We 'hear' our thoughts – some are pleasant; fantasy, music we like
  - Noisy or otherwise annoying thoughts (Pickleball, to some)
  - Thoughts with colors or smells ('distasteful,' immoral or impure thoughts? disgust?)
  - Thought/Action Fusion – false alarm of feeling like you moved or touched something; 'groinal' sensations in SO OCD; POCD
  - Emotional contamination/ e.g., – feeling like an unwanted aspect of another has osmosed into you Magical thinking (TAF); harm OCD; scupulosity
  - Painful thoughts/similarity to chronic pain process

# Sensory Dysregulation is Clinically Significant to OCD and its Treatment When...

- The person with OCD 'senses' (says) it is!
- Its an aspect of their subjective (phenomenological) OCD experience – time-consuming, interfering to functioning, etc.; does not 'trust' their senses'; tries to control
- Obsessions about past, present, or future experiences of sensory experiences are experienced at a high level
- Rituals/compulsions (e.g., trying to control or monitor their senses), engaging in avoidance behavior, or needing extreme accommodations to tolerate sensory phenomena
- When they indirectly exacerbate OCD, significantly increase stress in general, or derail treatment



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