



Sensory sewing for individuals with profound disabilities,
sensory processing difficulties or dementia.

On these pages you will find simple overview advice for things to think about when sewing sensory items for individuals with particular sensory needs. Anyone interested in more specific advice or gaining more detailed knowledge is welcome to attend a sensory training day (details available on <http://jo.element42.org>) or contact Jo Grace at the Sensory Project directly on sensorystory@gmail.com. For advice and support on sewing matters please contact the Sewing Kind.

Sewing for sight

- Red and blue are often favourite colours and can be easier for people developing their capacity to see, or losing their capacity to distinguish between colours, to see.
- Bold colours are easier to distinguish from subtle tones. (If sewing for someone who may find the visual environment overwhelming then you'll be choosing muted tones and avoiding detail).
- High contrast sections, for example black and white, are interesting to the vision.
- If sewing for someone with dementia particular images that resonate with their earlier life may be a motivating sight experience for them. Photographs are an obvious port of call but also consider the logos they may have seen as a child – what about old fashioned sweet wrapper images, or the logos from a workplace?
- Faces are naturally visually stimulating. Adding a happy or kind facial expression to an item can make it more engaging. The lens of our eyes have a reflex for faces so even a simple smile face doodle will draw the eye. Be mindful that if sewing for an individual with autism having faces on an item may be a source of stress.
- Concentric circles or patterns that appear to spin are often pleasing to the eye.
- Consider using fluorescent colours against high contrast background, e.g. a flash of fluorescent pink against a matt brown background.
- Fabric that will catch the light, or sequins, will make for an interesting visual experience.
- You could consider materials that will fluoresce under UV light as UV light bulbs are easy and inexpensive to come up and heighten visual experience by around 20 times, supporting people's capacity to see.
- Think about supporting any activities on your sewing item with colour, so for example if you are adding a button and button hole to an item can you make these stand out from the visual background?
- Detail can be wonderfully visually stimulating for those with the capacity to focus on it.



Sewing for smell

Smell is an incredibly powerful sense, it is unique among the senses as it is processed by the limbic brain – the emotional brain, when other senses are processed by the thalamus, the thinking brain. It can therefore be very easy to overwhelm someone with smell and it can be very powerful when connecting people to their memories.

- You can include smell in your sewing in many ways:
 - Dried rice or similar can be fragranced with essential oils and stitched into pockets (make it removable so that it can have new oils added as the fragrance dims and can be taken out for washing).
 - Dried herbs are great for making into scented pouches.
 - Products that naturally smell, for example soap, can be hidden in little pockets on an item.
 - Perfume can be spritzed on an item.
 - Items can be washed in different scented laundry detergents.

- If sewing for someone with dementia try to think about the smells they would have encountered in their late teens, early twenties. Smells relevant to their lives will be wonderful connectors to memory. Some to think about are:
 - The lotions, soaps, washing powders they used when caring for children, their favourite scent or the most popular scent of that decade as even if they didn't wear it themselves they're like to have smelt it.
 - Smells linked to their working environments, rust for someone who worked with metal, bleach for someone who worked in a hospital etc.
 - Washing powders, especially for people who have moved into care knowing what laundry powder they used at home can mean that they go to bed in a bed that smells like home to them, not alien.
 - Smells connected to particular times or seasons, consider the cloves and nutmeg and orange smell of Christmases.
 - Smells relevant to their culture, faith or heritage.

- Some smells are longer lasting, depending on their base notes. Lavender is a good example. People just learning to interpret smell signals, or those who've smell receptors have been diminished by the years may need strong scents like lavender or peppermint.
- Some smells are stimulating: peppermint, citrus smells.
- People in the early stages of development and those entering later age often like smells that could be considered sweet or sickly – banana, vanilla etc.
- There is some evidence to suggest zingy fruity smells make us feel happy.

The most important thing with smell is to watch reactions closely and be ready to change it if needs be. We do not want to be offering people smells they find distressing.



Sewing for touch.

There are so many different interesting tactile experiences that a sewn item can offer. It's worth thinking about the development of touch when we sew for people in the early stages of development or for people in later stages of dementia – where we often find that the neural pathways laid down early in life are the ones that remain longest as they are the ones that have been most reinforced throughout life.

- In terms of the development of touch the first touches we respond to our hard, sharp rough touches, so find ways to add texture to your sewing, think about including things like patches of rough side of Velcro, or layers of scratchy sequins, what about stitching hard beads into the lining of an item to create hard bumps, could you find beads with corners to have safe spikes to touch?
- As with all our senses, touching has two main parts, it is partly about our touch receptors receiving information from the world and partly about our brain interpreting that information. The brain is the bigger part. So think about the messages the touch experiences on your item will send, big bold messages will be easier for the brain to understand, so although lots of beautiful soft fabrics may feel lovely to us, they may be hard to feel for people whose brains are not as subtly wired.
- Think of including patches of contrasting texture, a slippery shiny fabric alongside a square of knitted itchy wool!
- Our hands are busy, for many people with dementia especially their hands will have been very busy throughout life. Tasks that may once have been simply accomplished such as the putting on of a coat, can become overwhelming as they are made up of many small steps that have to be achieved in order. Trying and failing to do such a task is damaging to a person's sense of self worth. However if they are offered the opportunity to do little bits of these tasks, bits small enough that they can be achieved, such as the doing up of a button, the fastening of a zip, they can have a small sense of a job well done. And cumulatively these little sets of accomplished tasks help a person to feel a sense of worth and achievement. Consider what little tasks might suit the person you are sewing for, think about how you can support these in a sensory way – e.g. through your choice of colours or textures, can you help guide a person's hands and eyes.
 - Consider different ways of supporting someone to be busy, chunky buttons may be easier than small fiddly ones, buttons with texture may be easier for the fingers to sense, toggles and loops may be easier than buttons.
 - Zips can vary in their smoothness, small zip tags can be hard to grip, can you sew on a bigger scrap of fabric or perhaps a loop of thread with a knot or button that can be pulled to operate the zip.



Sewing for sound

There are different types of sound and sound can help to orientate us and so be particularly useful if our other senses do not work so well. There are simple recording devices sold by institutions like the RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind) that can be hidden inside sewn items and pressed, something like 'Talking tin lids' can be a relatively inexpensive item, upon which can be recorded short bursts of sound – a message from a loved one could be a lovely thing to hear. But less elaborate sounds are important too. Here are a few you could think of including in your sewing:

- White noise sounds, these sounds fill space and are often quite soothing, a simple way to create a white noise sound is with scrunchy paper, or cellophane or plastic bag material (being mindful of suffocation hazards of course). Creating a pouch in an item which can be stuff loosely with wrapping paper or shredded plastic bag, means that when that pouch is handled it will make a rustling white noise sound.
- Rattley noises, these can be achieved using dried peas or lentils sealed inside plastic containers and then stitched into a piece. Think creatively as you do your weekly shop, small drinks bottles or spice canisters make ideal containers for turning into rattles.
- Clear high note sounds. Bell chimes are quite crisp and clear, they're used for alerts for precisely this reason and that sharp clarity often means we can respond to them auditorially when other sounds are harder to distinguish. When you shop at the haberdashers' for bells be sure to try them out, choose ones that ring clearly, not just decorative ones that give a little plasticity clatter.
- Squeaks! Many toys have a squeak in that you can repurpose, or squeaks can be bought directly for inclusion in a gift.
- Gadgets, many of today's modern devices, iphones and the like are great for playing sound through. It could be that making a little protective pocket for such a device would be a great way to allow for sound (and even video) to be a part of your gift.
- Twangs – the boing sound of a rubber band is a lot of fun and would be a way of entertaining and occupying busy hands, stitched across something hard it would make a gentle sound.
- The sound of the fabric itself, we've all worn squeaky clothes or heard someone's trouser legs rub together as they walk, you may find you can create sound simply by your choice of fabric...there's always bubble wrap!



Sewing for proprioception and vestibulation.

Our proprioceptive and vestibular senses are less well known but just as important to us when it comes to understanding the world and our place in it. Stimulating these senses is also a way of providing a rich sensory diet to someone who may not have access to all five of the famous five senses.

Your proprioceptive sense is your awareness of where your body is in space.

Your vestibular sense is your awareness of movement and balance.

Here are a few simple sewing ways of supporting these senses:

- Stretchy fabrics:
 - Things to pull, with hands or even feet, gives us information about where are limbs are, we feel the resistance against our muscles and joints and it lets us know where we are in relation to it. A loop of stretchy fabric to pull apart with the hands could be interesting to explore. Keep safety in mind always, we would not want to create a strangulation hazard. – for example perhaps fasten the loop with Velcro so that it would withstand some resistance but would not withstand firm pressure.
 - Wrapping garments, often people find compression wear clothing very comforting, it is the fabric equivalent of a hug, a tube of stretchy fabric can be worn around the upper body and shoulders and give the wearer a cuddle.
 - Tight stretchy clothing puts pressure on the tissues, it is more than a touch experience as touch is skin related where as this pressure stimulates the muscles and tissues below the surface, a simple arm band could equate to a reassuring grasp of the shoulder. As ever be super aware of safety, we do not want to risk cutting off circulation.

- Weighted items
 - Firm pressure is comforting, think of the weight of a cat on the lap. Creating heavy bean bag type items can be soothing.
 - Think of different locations on the body that could be soothed in this way, perhaps a weighted shoulder wrap, or something to lay over the feet.

- Items for moving with
 - Things to swing and throw are a lot of fun, especially if you add other sensory attributes to them. Consider making a shooting star – a stuffed, weighted star with tails of sequins and ribbons, this could be swung by holding onto a tail and moving it around – giving great information about where the arm is, or thrown and chased for a sparkly visual and vestibular experience.



Sewing for taste

Taste is perhaps the trickiest sense to sew for, but we do not want to give up because something is tricky, so think more about the mouth and what might happen to your gift if it went in someone's mouth. First and foremost you want it to be safe. Many people who lead their lives in a primarily sensory way very wisely employ their mouth for feeling things. This is sensible as the mouth has so many nerve endings and the tongue is a strong and flexible muscle, great for exploring texture with.

- Could you attach items to your gift that would be safe to go in the mouth and offer different sensations? Items like chew rings are often very expensive to buy when purchased from specialist outlets, the exact same items are often for sale in pet stores, but with a different label on. We are not being disrespectful of an individual when we creatively source useful bits and bobs from a pet store, we are just recognising those items for their sensory properties (and their wonderful non toxic chew safe plastic!).
- Could there be a sneaky little pocket for a snack? Some people may need to be encouraged to explore, the reward of finding a sweet hidden in a zipped pocket would be a very motivating way to inspire someone to want to preserve unzipping something (it would certainly work for me).