

# Sharing a sensory story

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## Sharing a sensory story

### Preparation:

Get ready: spend a little time thinking about how you will facilitate the stimuli and say the sentences.

Spaces have been left between the lines of the story on the main story card for you to make notes to remind yourself of what you plan to do.

Set up the stimuli so they are within easy reach. Have the story card somewhere where you can see it easily.

### Sharing the story:



Read each sentence clearly.

Facilitate the stimuli at the end of each section, or on a chosen word.

Try to use the same emphasis, and deliver the stimuli in the same way each time you tell the story. This can be especially important for some people, for example if you are sharing the story with someone who has profound and multiple learning disabilities.

## **Sharing a sensory story with someone who has Sensory Processing Difficulties**

### **Varying stimuli**

If you are sharing the story with someone who has difficulties with sensory processing you may want to build up the impact of the stimuli over time. By doing this you can use the reassurance gained from the repetition of the story to enable the person to interact with, and tolerate, different stimuli.

You can vary stimuli in different ways:

- For sounds you might be looking to begin quietly and get louder.
- For smells you might look to build the strength or the proximity of the smell.
- For tastes you may be able to dilute them by mixing them with something bland, or offer only small amounts initially – a touch on the tongue, a drop, a teaspoon full, a bite etc.
- For touches you may be varying duration, pressure, or even who is being touched. You could start by demonstrating the touch on yourself, after several tellings the person witnessing the touch experience will have built up an awareness that it is not dangerous. Some people will find a firm pressure easier to endure than a light one, with tickly experiences you may find it works better to begin with a firm touch and ‘fade’ the sensation over time.
- For sights you might vary the distance, proximity or strength of the experience. For example a bright light will have a greater strength in a darkened room, so beginning in a low contrast setting would be a way to give a weak experience.

In all cases what is appropriate is determined by the individual with whom you are sharing the story, as no two people are the same there is no set right or wrong way of doing things: do what is best for you and for them. Do not force someone to interact with stimuli.

## **Sharing a sensory story with someone who has dementia or mental health difficulties**

Sensory stories have been used to support individuals with dementia and mental health difficulties. Sensory stimulation is strongly linked to memory. The sense of smell can be especially evocative as, unlike the other senses smell is processed by the limbic brain (the emotional brain).

Depending on where an individual is on their journey into dementia you may choose to adopt different approaches. For someone who is quite far into their journey you may be looking for reactions to stimuli, and anticipation of the story itself. In this case you would use an approach similar to that described for individuals with profound and multiple learning disabilities found on page

If you are creating a sensory story for someone with dementia the choices you make about sensory stimuli will not solely be based on the strength of those experiences and the relevance to the story as they would typically be in the creation of a story. You will also be looking to find sensory experiences that have particular pertinence to that individual's life. This may also be true for creating a sensory story for someone experiencing mental health difficulties.

When sharing a sensory story with someone with dementia or someone with mental health difficulties you are presenting the experience of the story as an opportunity for reflection. You may want to share the story and allow time for reflections afterwards, or you may pace the story such that people may pause and share their responses to stimuli along the way. Ask your story experiencers about the emotions and memories that the experiences ignite for them and allow time to listen to their answers in full. Be accepting of all answers.

## **Sharing a sensory story with someone who has Communication Difficulties**

This is a very broad title and may include individuals with autism and specific speech and language impairments. Sharing the story telling space can give individuals the confidence to attempt communication, or be willing to interact. Do not worry if this does not happen straight away. Sensory stories are intended for re-telling: feelings of safety and security will build over time, just enjoy the story and be patient.

With individuals who are verbal you can encourage them to describe the experiences. You can allow the story experimenter to take a turn at telling the story. Being able to communicate without using words can take some of the pressure to speak away, and this can make it easier for people to try and vocalise.

Story experiencers are able to tell you the story back again, by facilitating the sensory stimuli. The ability to tell the story is not contingent upon the ability to speak. Similarly story experiencers can answer questions about the story, e.g. “what is your favourite part?” “can you remember what happens next?” through the sensory stimuli. By supporting communication, be it with signs, symbols or with sensory stimuli, we take the pressure off speaking and give a person room to progress at their own rate.

## **Using a sensory story to engage someone in communication.**

You may want to share the story with someone who is resistant to interacting with you, for example an individual with profound autism. To do this successfully you need to create a 'no pressure' situation. Of course there are no magic wand solutions to such challenges but the following describes an approach you might like to try.

### **Before the person you are sharing the story with arrives:**

1. Choose a space where you will share the story; try to make this free of other distractions. Make it clear where you expect the person, with whom you are sharing the story, to be. You could set out a table with two chairs (position the chairs at a slight angle from each other as staring each other straight in the face can feel confrontational), or have a carpet tile or cushion on the floor.  
Place the story box in sight (If you have resourced the story yourself, find an exciting looking box to keep the stimuli in; this will help to generate curiosity). Sit where you plan to be whilst telling the story.
2. Have clear expectations of the conditions you want for storytelling. Do you want the person to sit on the chair? Do you want them to be quiet or still? The story will be the reward for engaging in communication and will teach the experiencer about communication. If you tell the story whilst the other person watches TV, or climbs about, this teaches them that this is okay when communicating with others.

**Trust that your expectations will be met: believe in the individual's ability to meet them.**

### **When the person you are sharing the story with arrives:**

3. Let the person know what you expect. You can use gestures, signs or words. Do not worry if your instructions are not followed; just do your best to make yourself understood. Do not keep repeating yourself and do not increase the emphasis you place on the instruction. You are aiming to create a 'no pressure' environment. If you are happy you

have been understood then just wait. If you get a questioning look you can reiterate, or offer a nod or gesture to confirm what you would like to be done. Try to decrease, not increase this interaction.

Ideally the exchange will be something along the lines of:

- The person enters the room.
- You welcome them warmly and say/sign/indicate where you would like them to sit.
- You allow them the time to acquaint themselves with the room, to consider their options, to glance at you.
- Perhaps they look at the chair; at this point you might repeat your initial instruction, or simply offer confirmation and reassurance.

What you are hoping to avoid is something like this:

- The person enters the room.
- You immediately tell them to sit down.
- When they do not sit you instruct them again, imploring them or getting crosser and more verbose with each repeated instruction.

#### **Telling the story:**

4. Imagine you are a video waiting for the 'Play' button to be pressed. Sit passively in a position that indicates you are about to tell the story. Come alive only if the person provides you with the things you are expecting. This may not happen the first time you try (or the second or the third!) Do not worry, just stay seated for a reasonable duration, and then communicate clearly that the activity is finished and put the story box away. You want to foster curiosity about the box, so in this situation do not allow it to be played with or accessed at other times.
5. When the person does the thing you are expecting, spring into life and begin to tell the story. Now imagine you have a 'Pause' button. Pause as soon as the things you were expecting cease. In this way the person experiencing the story with you has control over

how much of the story they encounter, as well as how much communication they encounter. Do not be disheartened if you only get to say half a sentence. Allow the person to progress at a rate that suits them and trust that curiosity will tempt them to stay in the communication situation with you a little longer on each occasion.

Many people feel daunted by communication. Setting clear expectations and allowing a person to opt in or out whenever they want allows for communication to be built up gently, and enjoyed by both parties, over time.



## **Sharing the story with someone who has Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities.**

When sharing the story with someone with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) the most important things are to be consistent and observant.

### **Being consistent**

Deliver the sentences in a clear way, without adding extras such as “can you touch this,” or “oo look at the colours,” or “isn’t that nice?” Trust the words of the text to be enough on their own and use facial expressions or physical prompts, such as guiding someone’s hand or pointing, where needed.

Facilitate the stimuli in a way that is appropriate to the individual with whom you are sharing the story, for example: think about whether their hearing or vision is better on one side or the other, or whether they are more able to reach out with their left or right hand.

Remember, or record, how you facilitate the story so that you can be sure it is shared in the same way on the next telling.

Take your time and enjoy sharing the story and experiencing the stimuli together.

### **Being observant**

Look for indications that the person with whom you are sharing the story is aware of the experiences, or reacting to them.

Do not worry if there seems to be no reaction, or if the person only reacts to particular stimuli, it is still beneficial to share all the stimuli as doing so presents the brain with opportunities to lay down new neural pathways. Overtime these pathways can strengthen which is why it is good to repeat a story.

## Anticipation

Anticipation can be one of the most exciting things to observe when sharing a story with an individual with PMLD. Consider these two scenarios taken from the story about the birth of a star:

Scenario one:

The story reader, reads the sentence: “The atoms in the gas cloud feel the gravitational pull of the other atoms.” At the start of the sentence they hand the story experiencer one end of a bungee cord, and on the word ‘pull’ they pull on the cord. The experiencer smiles when they feel the pull.

The reader shares the story with the experience every morning for a week, on each occasion they hand over the bungee cord at the start of the sentence and pull it on the word ‘pull’. On the sixth telling of the story the experiencer begins to smile before their hand feels the pull. This pre-emptive smile lets the reader know that the experiencer knows what is about to happen. It is their way of saying “I know what happens next and I like this part.”

Senario two:

The story reader, reads the sentence: “The atoms in the gas cloud feel the gravitational pull of the other atoms.” At the start of the sentence they hand the story experiencer one end of the bungee cord, and on the word ‘pull’ they pull on the cord. The experiencer smiles when their hand is pulled.

The reader shares the story again, this time they pull on the cord at the end of the sentence. On the third telling they pull on the word ‘pull.’ On the fourth time they are interrupted whilst telling the story and have to restart the sentence half way through. On the fifth telling they pull extra hard because they know this is a favourite part ...and so on.

It is easy to see how anticipation is facilitated by the consistency in the first scenario. Of course life throws many challenges at us when we try to be consistent, some things cannot be helped but spending a bit of time making decisions about how you will read the story and facilitate the experiences can help you when you come to share the story.

## **Preferences**

Noticing individual's stimuli preferences can help you when it comes to making choices about their care, or their daily life, for example: you could choose a radio station based on their responses to sound stimuli; you could choose shower products based on their reactions to scent experiences. These small choices mean a lot to a person whose world is predominantly sensory.

## **Socialising**

The opportunity to socialise with others is very important, but it can be difficult for individuals with PMLD to reach out and invite others to share in an activity. Sharing stories that have wide appeal is a simple and effective way of socialising, humans have always shared stories together.

Research has shown that people are sometimes nervous of interacting with an individual with PMLD because they are not sure what is appropriate. By entering the story telling space together we can relieve these anxieties and simply enjoy sharing a story together.

