

## YOUNG THERAPY

Stacie Young, OTR/L - Occupational Therapist  
217.621.4441- phone/866.401.1462 - fax  
stacie.young32@comcast.net

### TACTILE DEFENSIVENESS

#### What is it?

Research shows that some people process tactile/touch sensation at a rapid rate. Once they detect this sensation they do not habituate (get used to) the stimuli. Therefore the sensation always feels "new" to the nervous system.

A person with tactile defensiveness does not become familiar or "used to" the multiple touch sensations they encounter on a daily basis. Because of this they are very sensitive to touch. They not only feel touch quickly, but also may be uncomfortable or painful to some sensations. When they have these feelings it can easily affect their mood and they begin to function in a "fight or flight" sense of alertness.

#### How do we cope?

One of the most common ways to help people with tactile defensiveness is a pressure brushing program. This was developed by occupational therapists to help decrease the feeling of sensitivity with touch. It can be established when working with an occupational therapist.

Other strategies can help decrease a person's reactions to touch. Just becoming aware of tactile defensiveness can help a person avoid situations where he/she may become irritable to new stimuli. Suggestions are listed below:

- Dress comfortably. A person with tactile defensiveness has a hard time feeling safe/comfortable in their own skin. Wearing comfortable clothing can help them feel relaxed without battling a scratching sensation for a long period. Forcing them to wear uncomfortable clothing is not a good idea because *they will never get used to it.*
- Deep, calming pressure massage can help a person with tactile defensiveness feel calm. Examples of deep pressure activities are firm massage on the arms, legs and back; gentle pressure to the side and top of the head; doing push ups, lifting weights; wearing snug clothing such as tights, undershirts which can provide firm touch to a large area on the skin.
- Using bath sponges, wash cloths while bathing to help introduce various textures to the skin.
- Exposure to various sensory manipulatives such as clay, paint, sand to give opportunities to become more familiar with the stimuli.
- Regular movement activities such as running, walking, swimming and biking can help give organizing input into the sensory systems.

Just recognizing tactile defensiveness can help one begin to understand why they behave a certain way. Learning more about how one's nervous system is wired can help begin a person's ability to adjust his/her reactions to various situations.

#### References

Fisher, A., Murray, E., Bundy, A. (1991). *Sensory Integration: theory and practice*. F.A.Davis Company. Danvars, MA.

Sensory Processing Disorder. [www.sensory-processing-disorder.com](http://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com)