SENSORY GROUNDING FOR FUNCTIONAL SYMPTOMS

For most individuals, functional symptoms are considered the result of 'software glitches' in automatic brain networks. These glitches are temporary, reversible (therefore the person affected is expected to return to normal functioning when these are managed) but can cause significant problematic signs/symptoms when they occur.

Automatic brain networks produce our normal day to day involuntary movements, such as walking. Walking is the result of a sequence of signals that our automatic brain networks produce involuntarily/subconsciously when needed, this sequence is established in early life when we learn to walk. Automatic brain networks also deal with sensation, for example pain. Our ability to involuntarily/subconsciously correctly detect pain at a specific level for each different painful stimulus is established through early life experiences. Sometimes our automatic brain network signals temporarily malfunction (considered a 'software glitch'), and we can feel pain when there is no real painful event (sensation is abnormally heightened) or we may not experience a sense at all (e.g. not see, not feel at all). Our movements can also 'glitch' and we may not be able to walk at all, or there may be abnormal involuntary movements. These attacks cause significant health anxiety, with anxiety worsening the situation. Think about a piano player who knows how to play a piece of music automatically without consciously thinking about it, who then becomes anxious at a time of an important performance – it is even harder to play the piece automatically when under stress, and conscious effort sometimes makes it even harder to play! In the same way, it is harder for automatic brain networks to return to normal function when anxiety is present, or when there is marked conscious effort to correct the abnormal sense/movement.

Sensory grounding techniques, however, are very important in mitigating or ceasing functional symptoms by directing your brain back to normal sensing and movement activities. Providing sensation, using the 5 senses, forces your automatic brain networks back to normal patterns of function. By increasing the sensory input in any of the senses with normal sensation, we can 'reboot' the brain and stop functional symptoms. Sensory grounding provides normal sensory stimulus and through providing it repetitively trains the brain back into normal automatic network functioning.

To use sensory grounding techniques, follow these important steps:

- Focus on your surroundings
- Take 3 slow, deep breaths
- Try doing an activity that changes your current experience in any of your 5 senses:

1. Sight – What do you see in the room? Name 5 things.
2. Touch – Handle/rub varying textures, such as counting beads on a necklace, rubbing a rough rock/pebble (this is useful as it can be carried around with you in a pocket), move items on a chain, rub a textured blanket/corduroy cloth, stroke a pet, use heavy touch/massage by a safe person w/ permission, burst bubbles that you blow
3. Hear – focus on listening to a safe person's voice, listen to music or certain sounds that capture your attention with ear phones (e.g. an audio book, animal sounds, relaxation music, sound of waves/the sea)
4. Smell – flowers, aromatherapy, sharp smells (certain foods), candles, lotions
5. Taste – Suck on candy that has a strong flavor e.g. sour lollies

If an activity in one sense does not work, try another. Sometimes it takes a few tries.

Activities that you can initiate and do yourself are preferred as this allows you to control your own attacks, without reliance/dependence on others.

Activities that involve multiple senses or sensation and movement (rubbing a rough pebble) may be more helpful.

After time, you will learn the activities that work the best for you. If you detect the earliest sign of a functional attack starting, then using these techniques early results in the most effective outcome – termination of attacks or permanent cessation.

Remember, sensory grounding techniques are not intended to stop you from sensing altogether. The goal is to help you stay grounded in the present, the sensory stimulus promotes networks in your brain to stay on track, avoiding the network ‘software glitch’ that progresses to produce functional symptoms