

ABSTRACT

Sensory ladders **EMPOWER** service users to regulate their daily sensory states and employ effective sensory strategies to support with managing dysregulation and distress. Research has identified that sensory ladders are becoming more and more recognised within mental health services (Fredericks et al, 2025), as they enable service users to understand and narrate their own sensory needs (Brown et al, 2009), in turn allowing carers and staff insight into how they can be best supported.

Individuals living with a personality disorder may experience intense emotional states based on their sensory input, which can lead to stress, distress, or overwhelm (Meyer et al, 2005). Sensory ladders provide a means to manage individual, unique sensory experiences and correlating risk presentation, enhancing participation in activities of daily living and manageable interactions with the wider world.

This poster presentation will detail the process of creating a sensory ladder, with guidance on the process, how sensory ladders link to occupational therapy practice, and the benefits they present for occupational therapy practice in personality disorder **CARE**.



WHO CAN COMPLETE SENSORY LADDERS?

Both OTs and OTAs

WHERE CAN I FIND TRAINING?

<https://sensoryproject.org/>



Overview

Sensory ladders are individualised, co-produced tools that empower service users to self-regulate their changing states of alertness through the day, especially those with sensory processing challenges, emotional dysregulation or specific sensory sensitivities.



Linking to Occupation

Occupational engagement is closely linked to sensory profiles, particularly with those who have a mental health diagnosis (Forsberg et al, 2025). By supporting with self-regulation and sensory processing, sensory ladders empower service users to engage in a variety of occupations, including social participation, IADLs and daily routines.



What does this mean for the service user?

They provide practical and meaningful strategies that allow the service user to independently manage their sensory input. Sensory strategies arguably play an important role in both the treatment pathway (Matson et al, 2021) and in the context of daily routines and occupations.



The Process

Assessment: Work with the service user to identify zones and coping strategies.
Customisation: Create an individualised ladder using visuals/colours/themes suited to the service user's communication and cognitive levels.
Education: Show the service user and their carer(s) how to use the ladder.
Integration: Include the ladder within the service user's daily routine.
Review: Regularly assess the effectiveness of the ladder.



The Zones - An Example

- **Calm:** Regulated and ready to engage.
- **Alert:** Energetic and potentially restless. May find a movement break helpful.
- **Overwhelmed:** Sensory overload and distress. May find deep pressure strategies soothing.
- **Tired:** Feeling low or fatigue. Trying cold water splashes or listening to energetic music.

SERVICE USER AND OT VIEWS

CONCLUSION

In personality disorder care, the use of sensory ladders empowers service users to narrate and manage their sensory experiences, both independently and with their carers and staff. Taking on a trauma-informed and consistent approach, we can demonstrate **RESPECT** for their sensory experiences, and support with risk management and distress. Sensory ladders are a valuable occupational therapy tool for improving occupational participation, emotional regulation and overall well-being.

REFERENCES

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"The collaborative approach is great in ensuring the sensory ladder is patient focused and led by them, including adapting the style, adding meaningful characters and ensuring it is reflective of them. The sensory ladders have proven effective in promoting autonomy and communication between service user and the wider staff team. I think everyone would benefit from doing a sensory ladder!" – OT

"Sensory ladders suit an OT's role, as they provide structure and routine." – Service User

"Challenging but helpful... invaluable." – Service User

I find sensory ladders to be a great intervention between therapist and service user to support sensory regulation. I find the intervention is best when a secure therapeutic relationship has been established it allows the sensory ladder to be a meaningful intervention with use of the therapists knowledge of the patient." – OT

"A useful tool for communicating with staff." – Service User