A Day in the Life of an Older Adult with Sensory Integration Difficulties

This is Mike, a 85-year-old man with difficulties with sensory integration and sensory processing. He has recently moved into a care home after a number of falls at home that left his family concerned that he was not able to manage independently in his own home. For a big part of his life, he participated in adventure sports and he misses the thrills of skiing down a slope or a fast bike ride. Mike's mobility has declined to the point where he needs a wheelchair for longer distances and going out in the community.

To see how difficulties with sensory processing and integration can affect older adults in everyday life, take a look at a typical day in Mike's life.

7:00 am

It is time to get ready for the day and have a shower. Mike is waiting for a shower chair as he no longer feels comfortable standing up in the shower, even with rails to hold on to. He finds that he loses his balance as soon as he lets go of the support rails. Yesterday he also scalded himself as he didn’t realise how hot the water was when he turned it on so a healthcare assistant offered to set the shower to the correct heating setting for him.

Sensory Integration Challenge: Sensory under responsivity: tactile, difficulty with vestibular processing (balance)

11:00 am

Mike is attending an exercise group organised by a physiotherapist and occupational therapist. Wheelchair dancing has recently been added to the programme and it is the highlight of his week. It gives him the opportunity to spin around and move fast which is something that he enjoys and doesn't get the opportunity to do very often.

Sensory Integration Challenge: Sensory under responsivity: vestibular (movement seeking)

Mike's difficulties with sensory processing and integration may include the following:

- Being under or over-sensitive to sounds, textures, flavours, smells or other sensory input
- Having difficulty carrying out new activities
- Having difficulty with bumping into things and knowing where your body is in space
- Seeking or avoiding certain types of movement
- Having difficulty with emotional regulation
- Having difficulty making sense of internal signals from your body like hunger or thirst
1:00 pm

Mike is getting ready for lunch in the communal dining room. He is hoping that today’s lunch will be less bland. He has found that as he has gotten older, his ability to taste different flavours has declined. This has made eating less enjoyable. His doctor has advised that he needs to increase his calorie intake and a dietician has been advising the catering team on cooking food with more intense flavours but this has not always been implemented.

Sensory Integration Challenge:
Sensory under responsivity: gustatory

3:00 pm

The care home has organised a woodwork workshop for residents. Mike is excited to attend as he used to make wooden furniture as a hobby when he was younger. However, he finds that his grip strength is no longer what it used to be and he visually has to pay attention to what he does as his ability to discriminate by touch has decreased.

Sensory Integration Challenge:
Difficulties with tactile discrimination

8:00 pm

Mike is getting ready to go to bed. He has been suffering from insomnia for a few weeks now. His daughter bought him a weighted blanket that she read might help. He is looking forward to trying it and seeing if it makes a difference.

Sensory Integration Challenge:
Difficulties with regulation and arousal

Many older adults also present with sensory processing and integration differences that can impact all aspects of their daily life. As an individual ages, their threshold to sensory information changes and they need more stimulation to be aware of their senses. Sleeping at night might also become more difficult as sleep patterns and deep sleep change with age.