

From The Times
October 20, 2007

Are you a sensory junkie or a nervous wreck?

How do you respond to bright lights, soft clothes, loud music and spicy food? Juliet Rix investigates the psychology of sight, sound and smell



Some people adore the feel of silk and velvet. They probably also savour the flavour of fresh peach, dress brightly and crave company. Others prefer their own space, calm and orderly, uninvaded by the noise of others.

We all experience the world through our senses but, even in exactly the same situation, what we experience may be very different. You can see this at any party: the gregarious one in the bright red dress commanding attention on the dancefloor and the one in the plain white shirt chatting to a select few in the calm of the kitchen. But it isn't only at parties that our sensory characteristics affect our behaviour. It happens all the time and, according to Winnie Dunn, the leading expert in the field who has just written *Living Sensionally*, the first nonspecialist book on the subject, if we can understand our sensory differences, we, and those around us, will have a better life.

Dunn, a professor of occupational therapy education at the University of Kansas Medical Center, works with children with learning disabilities and mental health problems, helping them to find strategies to cope with day-to-day life.

Through her research she has developed a system for identifying and defining patterns of sensory response. If you can understand where a behaviour is coming from, she says, it is much easier to find a way of dealing with it. For instance, an autistic child who frequently hits out at other children on the way to lunch or assembly may not be aggressive; he may simply be oversensitive to touch. Get him out of the crowd (let him hold open the door) and the immediate problem is solved.

We need to understand our differences

After developing professional questionnaires and categorisation systems for those working in her own and similar fields, it occurred to Professor Dunn that sensory profiling does not apply only to the sort of people she works with. In a less extreme way, it applies to, and affects, all of us. We all deal – at home or at work – with clashes between those who turn on all the lights and the radio and then want to share their every experience, and those who just want a quiet corner, no chatter and the blinds half-closed. Or indeed between those who leave piles of papers all over the house and don't even seem to notice them, and those who cannot think unless the place is neat and tidy. If we can understand these differences, Professor Dunn contends, we can negotiate solutions instead of just getting exasperated with each other.

So what sensory type are you and what is your partner, daughter, colleague? Are you a “seeker”, constantly after new sensory experiences and plenty of them; a “sensor”, very particular about your environment, needing to control it quite closely; a “bystander”, not that bothered and not that aware; or an “avoider”, easily overwhelmed by too much input?

A few people will be clearly one or another, but most of us are a mixture. You may be a seeker for touch (loving massage and furry animals, for instance) but a sensor, or even avoider, for sound (can't stand your partner's loud music/ the neighbour's TV). “I am a seeker,” says Professor Dunn. “My home is full of things to fiddle with and to look at and I approach food with reckless abandon. But I'm not a seeker for movement. I am the one who holds everyone's purses while they go on the amusement park rides.”

Her husband, Professor Dunn says, is mostly a bystander, which is great because bystanders have a high sensory threshold and aren't too fussed what is going on, so he can live happily with her high-octane seeking behaviour. The only problem with bystanders, she says, is that they may miss things others think are obvious. One woman came to see Professor Dunn after a seminar and said she regularly lost her temper with her husband because he ignored their children fighting in the playroom. She had thought that he was ignoring it; in fact he was a bystander and didn't notice. The arguments stopped and the couple was able to find a solution.

Could you be "incompatible" with your kids?

So, is it time to forget the star signs and look at sensory compatibility before settling down with your partner? There are certainly combinations that work more easily than

others, Professor Dunn says. Sticking to a similar type may be a safe option although sometimes it can be useful to live with someone complementary. Bystanders, for instance, get along with most types because they are fundamentally laid-back (although an avoider living with a bystander may find the lack of organisation very challenging), but two bystanders together can be a problem. You could find yourself living in chaos or forgetting to pick up the kids.

Sensors can live comfortably with avoiders: both have a low sensory threshold (ie, can't take too much stimulation) and so are unlikely to upset one another. Not surprisingly, sensors don't do so well with seekers; and a seeker-avoider partnership is going to involve a lot of understanding and negotiating.

It is all very well choosing your partner, but what about your kids? Nobody knows what decides your sensory type (presumably a mixture of nature and nurture) but it is perfectly possible to end up with an "incompatible" child. Recognise the problem, Professor Dunn says, and you're halfway to solving it. For instance: an avoider mum is very organised. Each morning she sets out her son's clothes and expects him to sit on his bed and get dressed. Seeker son has other ideas. He rolls the socks up and sees how far he can throw them down the hall. He waves his shirt at an imaginary bull. What is mum to do?

"She could place the clothes in different places around the room," says Professor Dunn, "so that the child's need for movement and variety is met while still keeping him focused on getting dressed." This is the same sort of problem-solving that Professor Dunn goes through with her "abnormal" patients and she hopes passionately that knowing more about sensory differences will also help people to understand those labelled with ADHD, bipolar disorder, Asperger's and so on. "It is a continuum, she says. "Someone with Asperger's really is like you, just more extreme."

Understanding your sensory type may also help at work, not just in resolving conflicts with colleagues but in selecting the type of work for which you (and others) are suited. Seekers, for instance, tend to be creative. They are great at ideas, development and working on several projects at once. They are less good at timely implementation. Bystanders can be a calming influence, particularly in a crisis, but they need reminders not to create crises by missing deadlines and being late for meetings. Routine, planning and organisation are avoiders' fortes, but don't expect flexibility or great people skills. If you want details checked, ask a sensor, but don't ask him or her to hot-desk.

Of course, Professor Dunn is not suggesting that all our behaviour is down to sensory typing: this is just one of many aspects of complex human psychology. But, she says, it is a helpful one to understand. It should allow you to construct a personal environment that works for you and to minimise the effort and emotional energy you put into the unnecessary, leaving you free to concentrate on the things that matter. It will, hopefully, help to reduce conflict, too, making for a more harmonious home, work and social life.

Living Sensationally (Jessica Kingsley) is available from Times BooksFirst for £16.99, p&p free: 0870 1608080 or visit timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy

Fame seekers: the characteristics of celebrities

What sort of sensory characteristics do the famous have? They're more likely to be seekers than bystanders and avoiders, but some people from all the groups achieve fame. Professor Dunn thinks these celebs may have the following sensory profiles:

Jamie Oliver **SEEKER** Hugh Grant **BYSTANDER** Russell Crowe **AVOIDER** Martha Stewart **SENSOR**

What's your sensory type?

SEEKERS enjoy going to firework displays; make noises such as humming and whistling; order or cook spicy food; tend to touch people when talking to them; walk around barefoot; change daily routines to keep them interesting .

BYSTANDERS are easy-going and not easily ruffled; have to be called several times to get their attention; miss signposts; may leave dirt on their face or hands; find scratches or bruises and don't know how they got them; don't notice clutter until someone points it out.

AVOIDERS leave the room when a crowd starts to gather; like their surroundings clean and tidy; keep curtains or blinds drawn or partially drawn; make narrow food choices; don't like getting their hands mucky; select solitary leisure activities.

SENSORS are distracted by sounds; startle easily; are bothered by fast-changing images on TV; have precise ideas about clothing textures; repeatedly pick the same food in restaurants; prefer clean design in the home; select only a few chosen rides at amusement parks.