

The Nervous System & Sensations

The part of our body that allows us to feel sensations both from the outside and inside is called the nervous system. It sends information from our nerves throughout our bodies to our brain. It also sends information from our brain out to our body to control our muscles, movement, and the functioning of our internal organs. The nervous system keeps us alive by regulating our breathing, our heart rate, blood flow, digestion and other important functions. The nervous system is the part of our body that allows us to feel sensations on the inside as well as sense things on the outside through our five senses. It processes sensory information from the outside and inside to know if we are in danger or in safety, and it responds accordingly. A sensation is a physical feeling that arises in the body, such as warmth, cold, tingling, loosening, tightening, heaviness, lightness, openness, and so on. Physical sensation words are different from general feeling words like good, bad, stressed, relieved, et cetera. They are also different from emotion words like happy, sad, afraid, and excited. Just as we can sense things on the outside with our five senses, we can pay attention to sensations inside our bodies as well. Sensations can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. For example, an external sensation could be feeling the warmth of the sun on our face when outdoors. An internal sensation could be the warm rush of blood to our cheeks when we are feeling embarrassed. We are capable of increasing our ability to recognize sensations, which in turn gives us critical information about how our nervous system is operating. Recognizing and identifying sensations as they occur is a practice we can use to support optimal functioning of our nervous system which can assist the body in self-regulating. Help Now! Strategies are not complicated to learn, and can be used anytime and anywhere to help our bodies become calmer and feel safer. One of those strategies is noticing sensations. When we practice this and other strategies we have agency over our responses, and can regulate ourselves. Help Now! Strategies were developed to give adults and young people small, doable actions that, when practiced and practiced, can be useful in times of stress or distress, for calming ourselves and regaining our ability to pause, think, and choose how to act. Help Now! Strategies involve doing a simple physical or mental task that redirects our attention, thereby giving our autonomic nervous system a chance to “reset.” Research shows that when the nervous system is dysregulated, directing attention to other sensations by doing activities like the Help Now! Strategies can have a regulating effect on the body, sometimes within seconds. Help Now! Strategies also tend to work best when coupled with tracking (paying attention to sensations inside our body