**Autism and Hypo-tactility – Touchy Feely**

April 17, 2015 by [Stella Waterhouse](http://www.autismdailynewscast.com/author/stellawaterhouse/)

Does your child enjoy being hugged?  Or like a ‘rough and tumble?’ Are you puzzled because he insists on contorting himself? And doesn’t cry when hurt? Or does his behavior simply distress you – perhaps because he hits or bites himself? If so it is likely that he is hypo (under) sensitive to tactile sensations.

In an article on the AUTISTIC EAGLE website, Sam, a 16 year old Aspie who lives in Australia, tells us what it feels like. He says that he ‘adores’ touch and goes on to explain that because his sense of touch is severely limited he cannot really feel things properly unless he uses the whole of his hand or his arm.

Like most things, such hyposensitivity has both an upside and a down. The upside because, this child will enjoy physical contact with his parents. But not being able to feel properly has a downside for it also means that the person will not necessarily be aware if they hurt themselves.

And that leads us onto the subject of self-abuse, for this is the child who craves sensation and what begins as sensory stimulation can sometimes escalate until it becomes self-injurious – as with the child who bites or hits himself or picks at scabs so that wounds do not heal.

The late Svea Gold, writer, educator and lecturer, tells us about Janet. As she wrote:

*I think I must have turned deathly pale when she finally allowed me to see her arms. They were covered with long slashes, some scabbed over, some still oozing blood. . . . As calmly as I could muster, I asked why she did it. “It calms me,” she answered. “Well,” I said gently: “This means you have no feeling in your arms or you could not do it. It would hurt too much!”*
*. . . no matter what the weather was, wind, rain or even snow Janet came without a coat, or even a sweater.*
*Now that I had seen her bleeding arms, it made sense that she never wore a coat. The same lack of sensation in her arms, gave her little differentiation between hot or cold. . . .*

Self-injury can have other causes too. These range from a response to pain, to a way of calming oneself (as Janet did), or even of expressing frustration or discomfort; behaviors that may sometimes evolve until eventually they are used as a way to avoid doing particular things. Then there are those, like Donna Williams, who tells us she used self-injurious behaviors (and behaviors intended to shock or embarrass others) as a ‘test’ – to see if she was actually real.

So is hypo-sensitivity always the underlying cause as Svea Gold thought? That is certainly true for many children – especially if they have other sensory differences. However, like exercise, self-abusive behaviors can stimulate the release of endorphins – which both block the pain and also induce calm – so that may be a factor too.

While on the subject of self-abuse it is worth noting that such behavior is sometimes involuntary. Certainly seizures have been associated with head banging, slapping the ears, chin and/or head, hand-biting, and even hitting one’s face with the knees. Biochemical differences may also underlie some of the other problems as with the child whose repeated head-banging was associated with milk or the study that identified an association between eye-poking and low levels of calcium: something rectified by supplements.

***Top Tips***

Explore and rule out possible medical/dental problems which could include:

\* Illness – like flu or infections.
\* Pain – like earache, headache, toothache, period pain.
\* Digestive problems.
\* Seizures. Common triggers include:

* Stress
* Sensory stimulation (lighting, noise etc.)
* Social stimulation (demands.)
* Foods.

\* If he is hypo-sensitive an Occupational Therapist may offer advice.
\* Use sensory toys – like a rocking horse or toys that.
\* Give him tactile stimulation – such as massaging his hands/feet.
\* If the child is hurting himself in an attempt to shut out the world offer some alternatives. This could include listening to music or tapping/banging an instrument or even his own leg.

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Quote by permission of the late Svea Gold.
Article – <http://autisticeagle.tumblr.com>