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Sensory modulation optimises daily life when co-created by young people with mental ill health and their families

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Introduction: Sensory modulation is used by mental health occupational therapists as a means of developing self-regulation and enabling occupation. Despite the growing body of literature in acute mental health settings, community studies are yet to investigate if, and how, sensory modulation impacts the daily lives of youth with mental illness and their loved ones.

Objectives: This study investigated the experiences of sensory modulation assessment and intervention and influence on daily life from the perspective of young people and their families engaged in community mental health services.

Methods: Narrative enquiry methodology involved semi-structured interviews with nine participants: six youth aged 16-26 years and three family members. Transcribed data was subjected to rigorous thematic analysis to find repeating patterns of meaning.

Results: Five processes underpinned the experience of sensory modulation: 1) Knowing yourself, 2) Co-creating the “why”, 3) Finding and creating comfort, 4) Creating connection, 5) Constantly reviewing and learning. Sensory modulation was found to positively impact the lives of participants, enhancing self-care, sleep, relationships, education, employment, fitness, community engagement.

Conclusion: Rationales for the use of sensory modulation need to be co-created with young people and their families, ensuring relevance to their unique occupational contexts and goals. Young people want to co-design sensory modulation strategies that optimise their daily lives. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of sensory modulation as a means of enhancing occupations, including sleep, relationships, work and study, in the field of youth mental health.