Substances and senses: Exploration of the sensory patterns of young people within an alcohol and drug treatment service

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Introduction and aims: Sensory approaches are an emerging area of research internationally. Studies have found adults with substance use disorders (SUD) have sensory processing patterns that are significantly different from the general population. However, no studies have investigated sensory patterns in youth with SUD. This study aimed to investigate sensory patterns within a youth SUD sample, and associations with substance used, trauma, quality-of-life, mental and physical health.

Method: A cross-sectional quantitative study was undertaken with 87 young people (mean age 20.8) who voluntarily attended a specialist youth SUD treatment service. Participants completed the Adolescent Adult Sensory Profile (Brown and Dunn 2002), in addition to measures routinely collected at the service.

Results: Participants' sensory processing patterns for low registration, sensory sensitivity, and sensation avoiding were significantly higher than the normative population, while sensation seeking was both lower and higher. Ninety-one percent reported atypical scores on one or more sensory patterns. High rates of probable Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD), psychological distress, and low quality-of-life were also reported.

Discussion and conclusion: Young people in this study reported atypical and complex sensory processing patterns, with comorbid probable PTSD, psychological distress, and low quality-of-life. Outcomes suggest young people may be engaging in substance use to avoid or to seek out sensory input, as a method of emotional regulation.

Implications for practice: Findings highlight the potential value of screening for sensory patterns and applying transdiagnostic approaches which simultaneously address substance use, mental health, trauma and sensory needs. While further research is required to establish causality, screening for sensory processing in AOD treatment services is recommended.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: No conflict of interests to declare.