

Matthew George ([00:00:00](#)):

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Speaker 2 ([00:00:22](#)):

Unsettled.

Matthew George ([00:00:24](#)):

Hello, listeners and welcome back to episode eight of the Sensory Friendly Solutions Podcast. This was so much fun. This was with Dr. Winnie Dunn, or Winnie as she happily encouraged me to call her throughout the course of the podcast. Dr. Winnie Dunn really has an incredible bio, and it's been so rewarding for us to speak to people who have been in the industry for so long and as Dr. Dunn put it to me, are well seasoned in the industry. She is a distinguished professor at the University of Missouri. She's been there for three years, serving as a mentor for faculty and for students. And before that, had a historic career as a professor of the University of Kansas Medical Center, that's 36 years. That's why I use the word historic. That's such an incredible tenure. Served as the chair of one of the top-ranked programs there for 31 years, really special. And with that, we give you Dr. Winnie Dunn.

Matthew George ([00:01:40](#)):

Hello, listeners. Welcome back to the Sensory Friendly Solutions Podcast. This is episode eight of season one of the podcast, and on the other side of the microphone today is the great Dr. Winnie Dunn. Dr. Winnie Dunn is the Distinguished Professor of Occupational Therapy Education at the University of Missouri in our friends south of the border, the US of A. And also if I have this right Dr. Dunn, the previous Chair of the University of Kansas Medical Center for 31 years. Do I have that right?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:02:17](#)):

You do have that right.

Matthew George ([00:02:19](#)):

Wow, 31 years. I think it says in total 36 years at the University of Kansas Medical Center.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:02:28](#)):

I'm well seasoned.

Matthew George ([00:02:30](#)):

Well the great thing about doing this podcast is we've talked to so many experts in the field who have seen the field evolve. Dr. Carol Kranowitz, Bill Wong, Karine Gagner, these amazing folks who have seen the field evolve and have been around and are well seasoned as you say, but that's nothing but experience.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:02:50](#)):

Right, right.

Matthew George ([00:02:51](#)):

Dr. Dunn, with your permission, I'm going to read a bio that I came across on the internet. I'd like to see if this either matches your experience of the world right now and where you are in your professional life, or you can maybe correct it as we go. I think it's interesting for folks to introduce their own work in their own words, but also juxtapose that with some things that are written about you. Is that okay with you?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:03:18](#)):

Well, this will be very interesting. I always tell people, "Only believe half of what you hear."

Matthew George ([00:03:25](#)):

Yes, yes, isn't that right? Isn't that right? Okay, here we go. Dr. Winnie Dunn is a world renowned expert on the ways that sensory experiences affect our everyday lives. She's studied babies to older adults, to identify patterns or reactions to sensations and has published more than 100 journal articles, book chapters, and books. Her book, *Living Sensationally: Understanding Your Senses* is written for the public, and contains over 100 entertaining stories to illustrate how people's sensory reactions affect their relationships and daily life.

Matthew George ([00:04:03](#)):

She has received numerous research and teaching awards as well, and has been invited to speak throughout the world. Her work has been featured in *Time Magazine*, on Canadian Public Radio, in the *London Times* newspaper and in *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. In 2008, she was named a favorite author by *The Pitch* newspaper. She's Professor and Chair of the Department of Occupational Therapy Education at the University of Kansas. She lives in Kansas City with her husband, Tim Wilson. How did they do?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:04:35](#)):

Not bad. That is pretty well done. I'm very happy to hear all that.

Matthew George ([00:04:43](#)):

Okay, that good.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:04:44](#)):

It clearly was written a few years ago because I'm now at the University of Missouri. I think they did a great job, really good job.

Matthew George ([00:04:54](#)):

Okay. And before we get to your work in your own words, before we hit record, we briefly spoke about the election. For those listening to the podcast, Dr. Dunn and I are recording this on election day and for us Canadians, American Election Day is still very important. We're paying close attention. Tell us what it's like on the ground.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:05:17](#)):

It is so wrought with emotion. Everyone is anxious and excited. I think the good thing about the hard period we've been through is that it has activated people. Democracy only works if all the citizenry

participate, and we are having record participation. I wish it was because of something more positive than, "We got to change this." But nonetheless, I think when people get activated and see that they do have a role in their democracy, it changes the landscape. This morning on the news I heard in Georgia, for example, which is one of the states that has had really restricted and devious things to try to suppress the vote.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:06:16](#)):

There's a particular politician that has been working really hard in Georgia and she told us, Stacey Abrams, that 60 ... Before the count today, the voters that'll vote today, 67% of the citizenry in Georgia have voted. That is an enormous number. I wish they had a rule like Australia does where everyone is required to vote. But for America, that high of a turnout really tells me that people are really paying attention. They're seeing that they have a voice and they're using it, and I'm really so happy to see that part of it.

Matthew George ([00:07:02](#)):

Yeah, I'm a big Stacey Abrams fan. And also, interestingly you mentioned Georgia. I have an uncle who's a retired US Coast Guard, and he's now living-

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:07:10](#)):

Oh, my goodness.

Matthew George ([00:07:11](#)):

Yeah, and he's now living in Alabama. It's interesting because he finds himself a fairly left leaning person in a right leaning state and he said that personally from his point of view, from on the ground, and of course you don't know unless you're there, that social tensions are pretty high in America right now.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:07:31](#)):

My big fear for today and the next days after today are ... There's been tacit permission given for people to misbehave, and I think there's people just primed to misbehave. They're being given permission by some of the rhetoric and that worries me because once that starts, people don't use their common sense. They get enraged and then their behavior gets out of hand. I worry about, especially places where it's very contentious, that it won't take much of a spark to get people to a bad place. I just hope people's better angels prevail today and the next couple of weeks.

Matthew George ([00:08:25](#)):

Yeah. Well, we're really pulling for you. Obviously what happens in America really affects us north of the border. Many of us have family members who are either living south of the border or were born south of the border, so we're pulling for you, but also this year has been very difficult for you all. We'll get to the issues in short order, but I do want to do a little bit of a COVID check-in. As always seems to happen in the 21st century, all eyes are on America; COVID, the election. Maybe just very briefly before we get into your work, talk about what it's been like south of the border and how you're managing.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:09:03](#)):

Yeah, this is such a complex time, isn't it? All these things converging. I got my certificate and positive psychology coaching several years ago because we've done some research on coaching, and one of the

things that my teacher always said was that just before a breakthrough, there were these disparate variables that kind of stirred things up, so I'm hoping this is the breaking open period for the world. I think that the activation of people's paying attention is a good thing. I feel personally a lot of cognitive dissonance because as a person who does research and teaches others to use evidence, I watch all the countries that have had success with tamping down the virus while we, because we know don't have a national plan and because we're relying on all these people to make decisions as if people in Missouri are only going to stay in Missouri and people in Kansas are willing to stay in Kansas, they're not.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:10:15](#)):

Our rates are going up, they're still this week higher than they've ever been. In my city, our mayor has made a rule that everybody has to wear masks when in public, and that has really calmed things down because there's no argument or statement to be made, people just put their masks on. When you go into the hardware store to get something or you go to the grocery store, people just put their masks on. Every store has a sign that says you have to have a mask. Most of them have somebody at the door monitoring people and reminding them that they can't come in without a mask, so it has really calm the waters. But in general, we all feel this angst all the time. Even watching a movie that has like a party in it, all of us, we've all talked about ... We go, "Oh my gosh," because we can't go to a party. Our first thought right now is, "Those people aren't being safe." That's crazy, that we have to be so mindful about encountering other human beings when that's part of our lifeblood, is interacting with each other.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:11:38](#)):

I've also been struck by ... You know, this is a human characteristic. Things have been available to us for a long time, for example, all this technology. We had the opportunity to have meetings like this for five years, maybe 10 years and we never did it. I mean, we did it once in a while. But now because we're being pushed into it, we're finding out that there are topics and situations where that's a better choice. We're finding out that giving students projects to really make them think deeply about a subject matter and solve a problem is a much more engaging way to teach.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:12:24](#)):

We had that opportunity to do that before, and some of us did it and some of us did not. So, I think that there are some ... Companies are seeing that people can be equally productive with a flexible schedule. Companies are rising to the challenge of finding education and daycare options for their employees, giving them flex time. There's things that they could've done all along that make people feel valued. I wish it wouldn't have to be a crisis like this to do it, but this virus has invited us. I did a talk last week for New Zealand and I said, "What if Mother Nature is nudging us to be more equitable, to be more reasonable with each other by this extreme action?" I just think that ... I have my days. I don't know if you've read the book Gentleman in Moscow by-

Matthew George ([00:13:25](#)):

I loved it.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:13:26](#)):

Amor Towles. I mean, he's like-

Matthew George ([00:13:30](#)):

Yes, Amor Towles.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:13:33](#)):

I think about that gentleman in Moscow because he was ... If people haven't read it, he was confined to this tiny little boutique hotel in Moscow as a punishment during the Bolshevik Revolution. He could've been bitter and pissy and angry, and he created a full, beautiful, substantial life inside of the walls of that boutique hotel. So frequently during this ... Because I'm in a privileged place. I have a beautiful home. It's an old house and it has servants quarters on the third floor, which of course, we've never had servants so I have my office up here. So I can get dressed and go to the office, I can go back downstairs and have a rest. I can create a ritual of the day inside these walls.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:14:32](#)):

I think if I hadn't read *Gentlemen in Moscow*, I wouldn't have been able to access that substance of you get to decide what your life is like. I'm not saying this isn't horrible. I can't imagine a family member dying where you cannot see them or be with them. I mean, it just kills me. One of my best friends works in a nursing home facility where there's cascade of care, and it's just heartbreaking the things that families are going through. And to have people in our government act like that doesn't matter, it is what it is and some of the crass comments, it just is infuriating. I just said a whole range of emotions about one little thing.

Matthew George ([00:15:25](#)):

No, it's the perfect starter for this conversation because ... And it's funny you mentioned *A Gentleman in Moscow*, because I've actually recommended it to many. We didn't have very long, strict lock downs on the East Coast of Canada. In fact, we have one of the lowest transmission rates on the planet right now, which is great and I hope we keep that up. It's not true of Ontario and Quebec, but it is true of the East Coast, and so I've recommended that because you're exactly right. This is a time when we all have to dig deep. We're certainly in this together and first and foremost, it's a healthcare crisis. But like you mentioned, it's a time for us to rethink some things and some of those imbalances that we've struck.

Matthew George ([00:16:03](#)):

One of the things that I wanted to bring up to you, and I was going to save this for the end of the conversation but now is the right time. Our relationship to information as of June 2020th, sensory overload was being searched over 40,000 times a month on Google. Now, the most important thing about that stat is the trend line. That's an increase of 50% from 2019 on Google Trends. How do you interpret that Winnie? We've asked many of our guests to just wax on this, but is our relation to information and media totally out of whack?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:16:42](#)):

I'm filled with deep sadness that that many people need to know about this in the terms of sensory overload, but I'm also ... It makes me so happy that I perhaps have contributed to people knowing to ask that question. The thing about sensory processing, it is a fundamental feature of the human experience. Our brains don't know anything, if they don't know it from our senses. That's the only way. It's the only way we know anything. And because it's so fundamental, people tend to look over it because they don't ... It's so organic to who we are, we don't we don't notice and the fact that people are searching sensory overload tells me that they understand that their senses have something to do with this.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:17:56](#)):

The good news for me when I speak with others, is that we can do something about a tangible thing, like something being too noisy, or too scratchy, or too slimy or too bright. We can take an action based on understanding that our senses are getting overloaded. That sense of being able to take an action helps us feel more ... It's a step towards feeling more in control. And when we feel more in control, we have a sense of calm, "I can figure this out. I can do something to help myself. I can make it better for my son." We have a sense of our humanity is in our hands that way. The ambiguity of just saying I'm overloaded, or I'm overwhelmed, or I'm anxious, or I'm depressed, those words, they're big words but they don't tell us what to do.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:18:58](#)):

I think one of the greatest gifts that knowledge about sensory processing has given the people who know about it is the idea that they can understand themselves, they can understand their family members, their co-workers, and they can add grace to the story. You can understand somebody and not make a judgment, you can take an action on their behalf. You can take your child that's overwhelmed to another room and nobody will judge you for having a bad kid. You just say, "You know, this is too noisy for him right now. We're going to go in the other room for a minute, we'll be right back." I just think that having an action to take helps us feel like we're in charge of ourselves, and that sense of being in charge helps us calm down.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:19:53](#)):

Overwhelmed means things are happening to us and we can't do anything about it. Visually for me, it's like getting bowled over like falling backwards and having all this, whatever it is, rolling over me, and having control means that I can either stand up to it or turn my back to it. I can walk away and do something different, I can change the circumstance I'm in, I can adapt the activity that I'm doing. I can decide something on my behalf. I hope that when they search, they're finding evidence based information and not just goofy stuff that sounds cute, but it doesn't really ground itself in the evidence of what we know is true about people's sensory patterns.

Matthew George ([00:20:47](#)):

Yeah. Do you think 2020 has been the perfect storm and has created that 50% increase because of this idea of control? I mean, there has never been less of a sense of control than in a time when the air itself could be detrimental to your health and touching people could be detrimental to your health. Do we crave knowing what to do and control, and then when we don't have it we get overwhelmed?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:21:14](#)):

Yeah, I think that's true. I do think that's true. You know, people have always gotten overwhelmed but I think the thing about sensory features of being overwhelmed is that we can do something. If I'm overwhelmed with too much to do at work, somebody might have to help me figure out what's the next step. Anne Lamott, I don't know if you've read any of her books, but she wrote a book called Bird by Bird, and part of a story was around her growing up and her brother was trying to do a paper. He had a talk about all the bird species. It must've been biology or something, and he couldn't get started. He just kept sitting there and he couldn't get started. And the dad said, "Son, you have to go bird by bird." I use that phrase for myself a lot. What would my next step be? What's the next bird, to break it down. But that's a cognitive strategy that people don't always have access to either.

Matthew George ([00:22:28](#)):

We're going to get to strategy towards the end of the show, some of your personal strategies. But if we could, can we trace your career arc a little bit? Can we dig into a bit of the inspiration for this well seasoned career you've had?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:22:42](#)):

Oh, my gosh. You know, I turned 70 this year and I have come to have a phrase in my lexicon that I didn't have before called In my Lifetime. Because sometimes when people get discouraged that we're not making progress, because day to day things can feel like, "Oh my god, that rule is never going to change." I've looked back in the last few years at ... When I started being an occupational therapist, children didn't get to go to school that had severe disabilities, and girls didn't get to play sports. We didn't have all the vaccines we have today. We didn't have some of the strategies for people that have hearing impairments. When you look big ... We're horrified today if a child isn't in his neighborhood school, and back then children were in institutions. So this idea of what my career looks like, me telling it from this vantage point is very different than me living it going forward. When I look back I see patterns, but when I look forward I see willingness.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:24:00](#)):

When I started as an occupational therapist, I lived in Missouri and Missouri had a special education law before the federal government in America had one. So, I was able to get hired by a public school because I had a master's degree in special education in a brand new field called learning disabilities. The fact that I was an OT was a bonus, because OTs only worked in institutions and segregated schools, and places like that. So here I was just beginning my career, and this is a pattern I see now but at the time I didn't know it was going to be a pattern. That willingness to go into a setting and use those skills as an occupational therapist to make that place better in a way that no other regular public education school could do because they didn't have any occupant therapists there.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:25:02](#)):

So, my career is marked by that willingness to be adventurous and willingness to ask questions and willingness to changing my mind when I got new information, which is something I've seen is really hard for professionals. We seem to think that we have to have one idea and then hold on to it with a death grip. Whoever thought your first idea was your best idea? That doesn't make sense, but we still do it. Through my career I worked in public schools, I went to school while working. I started some preschool programs in rural areas so that families didn't have to travel to the city for their children to get special services like occupational therapy, or speech therapy. I did all those entrepreneurial things, just forging a path.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:26:04](#)):

What I know now is that my roots ... OTs care about people's routines in their everyday lives. They care about people having a satisfying day, and a satisfying week, and a well seasoned set of recreational activities. So what I see in my career is that I kept working in authentic places. I worked in public education, I created these preschool programs in these rural areas while I worked on my PhD. I always cared about the places where people inhabited, not the places that we professionals create for them like clinics and hospitals. And I know people have to go to the hospital and we're all glad to have them there, but the core of OT is about living. So when I look back on my career, I see that I kept choosing authentic places. That's I think, why I have such a clear sense about the contribution that I can make as

an OT, but I also know that having a special ed background gave me some tools that other OTs didn't have.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:27:16](#)):

And then I ... My PhD is in neuroscience, and again, it was a program that wasn't developed yet. I was in the first graduating class of the OT program at Mizzou. I was also in the first graduating class of the special education learning disabilities stream at Mizzou. Then several years later when I went and got my applied neuroscience degree, my PhD at Kansas, they were trying to develop an interdisciplinary PhD, which was unheard of at the time. They were experimenting with neuroscience because by its nature, it's interdisciplinary. I was with one other woman, we're the first graduates of that developing. Do you see a pattern?

Matthew George ([00:28:10](#)):

I do. You're a pioneer.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:28:10](#)):

I'm like, "What?" I mean, at the time I didn't think about it but when I look back, I'm like, "Oh, my goodness." That sense of adventure and that sense of willingness to forge some territory, to be curious about something, it's very telling. So authentic environments and adventurous, willing decision making, I guess, would be phrases I would use.

Matthew George ([00:28:37](#)):

That's the theme.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:28:39](#)):

Yeah. You know, there's people like when I was on one of my fieldworks in OT, I was in a segregated school because that's what they had back then. These teachers and therapists, they were just so dedicated to the children and they were so ambitious about finding a way no matter what. They did things like ... Back then people thought teaching children to sign would keep them from talking, but they would ... To keep kids from getting frustrated, they would teach the kids very simple signs like more, and potty, and yes and no, and drink. They would sneak the signs, because it was not a practice that was sanctioned at the time, but they would see if it helped.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:29:37](#)):

They would see if it helped a kid and if it did, they kept going and if it didn't, they changed, and I learned a lot from that. I learned that you got to try stuff. You got to be willing to see the good and the and the failures in your choices, and be humble enough to move on. Either make it bigger or stop doing it, and that really has helped me in my career to just be willing. To just be willing to say, "That's the best I could do right then, and now I see more information and I have a new idea," or I have an enhanced idea, or have a different direction for my ideas.

Matthew George ([00:30:18](#)):

You seem to have made a career of getting into emerging markets and emerging fields. Compare and contrast to now, what are you focusing on and thinking about in 2020, and maybe a little bit about how the field has changed?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:30:34](#)):

Well, you talked at the beginning about my sensory processing background and creating an assessment the sensory profile, which is used around the world. But lately in the last decade or so ... Some kinds of research don't get done because they're hard to do. And in my profession, people had been reluctant to try intervention research because it's just hard and it takes funding, and people weren't as sophisticated because our profession is younger. I really want people to understand that sensory processing isn't an end to itself, it's a way to understand people so that we can help them make their lives more successful and satisfying. It's a piece of information that helps us do better. It's not the end by itself. So, I started looking at evidence based intervention practices.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:31:41](#)):

That's when I got the positive psychology coaching training and certificate. We've done several studies about using coaching practices. They've been shown to be really effective in business, in education, in social systems, so we use the evidence to create some ways to do it in OT. Then we added on to that telehealth practices because we have in the Midwest here in America, we have a lot of people that live in rural areas that are one or more hours away from care. The cost of getting there and getting back, or having the family travel that far, it just wasn't practical, and so those families weren't getting the care they needed. It's ironic because in my first part of my career, I helped create these rural practices so families didn't have to travel.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:32:51](#)):

The studies that we've done have shown that coaching is a really satisfying way to practice your profession, and it's so satisfying for the families because they feel like we're empowering them to solve a problem and come up with an idea and we keep standing with them until they find the right one. It makes them feel so strong and so happy to understand how to parent their child. And telehealth, these families that live one or two hours away, can you imagine them getting a kid that needs care in a car, with a sibling, driving one and a half hours for one hour of care, and then driving back with all the going potty, and the eating, and the car behaviors and everything else? How could we think that that would be helpful to a family? Whatever magical benefit we did would be undone before and after that moment. The families are so grateful to have one hour of care, and be done.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:34:00](#)):

They don't have to clean up their house because somebody is coming to visit, they don't have to get their kids in the car. It costs about a third less to provide care that way, also. So, that's what I've been doing lately. I see sensory processing knowledge as a tool to help us do the other things we do better. We can talk to families, "Well, he's sensitive to sound so how's it going to be when he goes to grandma's house? What's it like there? What are some things you can do to manage that? How are you going to handle it if he starts to get overloaded? What are you going to do next? How are you going to talk to your mom about this so she understands what's going to happen when you get to her house?" It makes the families feel like we get them, it makes the families feel like we're listening, and it makes them feel so smart about parenting their child. What could be better? I can't imagine what other things would be more satisfying than that kind of work.

Matthew George ([00:35:08](#)):

Absolutely, Dr. Dunn. For our listeners, we want to make sure that we're not only talking about tactics and tools and strategies, but we also want to give a comprehensive list of resources. Are there any

resources that you've penned personally or that you've really enjoyed that not only parents, but families, but individuals can access?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:35:31](#)):

\Well, I did write a book for the public. I felt really strongly a number of years ago that we need to normalize this, we need to quit talking about sensory processing as if it's a disease or a disability or a deficit. I mean, I'm done with all the bad words. People have heard me talk about this. I feel like we have to quit making a judgment about people's characteristics. I learned some of this from adults with autism. They are who they are. They're not damaged goods, they're interesting people that have something to contribute and that's true for every single person, and we have done a disservice, all of us professionals by acting like we get to decide that this or that characteristic of a human being is unacceptable.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:36:21](#)):

I feel like we have to talk about being a human being, so that's what Living Sensationally does. It's talking about sensory processing in a way that your mom, and your aunt, and your uncle, and everybody in your neighborhood can understand. It has lots of stories about people, giving illustrations of how your sensory patterns show up in your everyday life and what you can do about it, how you can make adjustments in service. To feel fine about that you need to pull the shades down because it's too bright, that that's just the way you need your environment to be. There's no judgment about it, there's no thinking you're weird, it's just you being empowered because you know what you need. That book has been translated into many languages, and it seems from the feedback I get to be really helpful to people to feel like they're in there, their kid's in there. Everybody they know is in there and it makes it okay. We got to stop, we got to stop acting like something's wrong.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:37:47](#)):

A public book I read just lately that I think is good for our times is called Together by Vivek Murthy. He was one of the Surgeon Generals in our country, and it's about his discovery in talking to people. One his things was to go out and talk to people to find out what he needed to do as the Surgeon General of our country. He saw that this idea of people feeling lonely, even when other people were around, not knowing how to connect with each other or connecting in these surface ways without having that human sense of connection. That book has been ... I've thought about it a lot in COVID because it gives you a sense of how to really connect with people in a deep way, even though we have been restricted from the typical ways.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:38:44](#)):

One of his arguments is that it makes us think more deeply about how we're going to connect with people and be more mindful about it. Not just let it happen spontaneously, but how we reach out to others and how we honor what our loneliness is telling us to do, and how this sense of togetherness is one of the most healthy behaviors we can engage in. That doesn't have anything to do specifically with sensory processing, but I think people that are more easily overwhelmed can feel lonely quicker. So having strategies like connecting with somebody by Zoom or making sure you text people, just using the other tools that we have available to feel connected to other people. There's lots of writing right now. For some people it's controversial, for me it's like, "Finally."

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:39:50](#)):

Autobiographies of people that have had disabilities and differences. Listening carefully to what they say their lived experience is. The New York Times put out a book of all the essays that people wrote in the disability section of their People part of their newspaper, and it's just essays of what everybody's experiences are. What it's like to have a prosthetic, what it's like to have deafness, what it's like to have cerebral palsy as an adult, living a full life. I think that we, at least in my age group. I don't know about your experience, but we were taught to segregate people by these characteristics and I feel like in the future, we need to think more carefully about what people with different experiences have to say.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:40:56](#)):

The irony, Matthew, is that I start when I started working on sensory processing and research, of course what we all do, we started testing people with disabilities because they have a more intense version of the experience. They're more sensitive, or they're more avoidant, or they miss more cues and so it's easy to see, of course, it's easy to see. I would do these studies and I'd go out and start talking about it, and somebody would come up to me at the break and say, "My husband does that. My neighbor does that," or "I do that." People that otherwise would've called themselves typical human beings are saying, "You know that quirky thing you just talked about?" I do that." "My husband's really picky about the damn socks he wears. He only buys one brand and they quit making them. I don't know what to do." You know, those practical things.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:41:56](#)):

So, it dawned on me that this is about all of us. The gift that people with conditions like autism have given us is by showing us what it looks like in a more intense version of maybe the version that we have and that makes it easier for us to talk about, because we can see the terrain of it, we can see the topography of it. But that being said, I did some population studies because I wanted to show people children and adults that we would call typical, that have never been diagnosed, that have nothing going on that we would put a label on, also have intense sensory experiences. They have the same scores on the sensory profile as a kid with autism, or a kid with ADHD or an adult with schizophrenia. The same scores, and they're living a full life. We can't say that those things are a disability or a deficit, when all of us in bell curve of human beings have something of it, right?

Matthew George ([00:43:06](#)):

Sure.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:43:10](#)):

If you plotted all my characteristics on the bell curve, I'd be all over. I'd be really high on some stuff, I'd be really low on some stuff, I'd be in the middle on some stuff, so which one are you going to pick to decide if Winnie is acceptable? The truth is, Winnie is complicated, you're complicated, we're all these ... One of my favorite old quotes was from an English biologist. He said, "If the brain were so simple that we could understand it, we would be so simple that we couldn't." So the fact that we have to keep grappling with this, that we have to keep talking about it, that we have to keep explaining it to each other and thinking more about it is the very nature of what incredible beings we are.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:44:03](#)):

I asked families, for example, like, "What is your favorite thing about Jason?" The sad thing is that a lot of professionals wouldn't ask that. They know what they love about him, but nobody's ever asked so they get tongue tied for a moment, but they love that this literal kid is funny. That he takes everything

literally and it is hilarious. It reminds us how bad our language is. They love the interesting parts. One of my doctoral students came in one day. We were talking about his dissertation and he was lamenting because he had just seen a family, a mom that had a kid with autism at her home. He said, "Winnie, I felt so bad. She was talking about how she can't tell any stories about her son that has autism, because everybody thinks that she's making fun of him."

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:45:02](#)):

So he and I started brainstorming, and what came out of that conversation is something that we're now in our seventh year I think. It's called an Evening with the 'Rents, and 'Rents is parents. This young man is very resourceful, so we found some stand up comedians, professional stand up comedians here in Kansas City. There was a guy in Chicago that also had a kid with autism, so he volunteered to help us. We took a year, and we got I think eight parents the first year, and they coached them. They told their funny stories about their kids, and then these stand up comedians coached them until they could tell the story in a way that would be stand up comedy format, like, "Take this part out, lengthen this part, pause here, raise your eyebrows," all the little techniques.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:45:59](#)):

So, we had a fundraiser called ... We have a fundraiser called Evening with the 'Rents where parents, and now the last two years we've had actually adults with autism do a stand up comedy routine. It's a whole evening have people doing stand up comedy, telling stories about their family members, or themselves that have autism.

Matthew George ([00:46:18](#)):

Oh, that's wonderful.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:46:19](#)):

And it is hilarious because it's ... And we talk about at the very beginning, "This is a guilt free, judgment free zone. This is the truth about the lived experience in these families, and we embrace and cherish all of them." To me, that's what our future needs to look like, is this big, big thinking about what each every person has to contribute. And asking you, for example, "What's something they don't like about yourself and how is it helpful to you?" I'm really uncoordinated. When I was standing in line, I didn't get much of that. What that has taught me, I call it my uber-strength is persistence, because first of all, I get to decide if I want to do something or not. But secondly, if I decide I want to do something, I stick with it and figure it out.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:47:25](#)):

It took me seven months literally, I know you think I'm exaggerating, but it took me seven months to do a pose in yoga called Ardha Chandrasana, which is called flying half moon pose. It's standing on one foot and your body is parallel to the ground, and your arms are up and down. Of course all the little dancers and athletes in my yoga class could just pop right in, but I had to stand ... I literally stood on the wall with my butt-cheek on the wall every day, just to give myself enough stability that I could sense internally what I was feeling in that position so that I had a really clear body map of what was required of this pose. That's an example of all the things that I've done in my life with this uber-strength of persistence, because my incoordination required it of me.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:48:28](#)):

So, we have to quit disparaging a person that's highly sensitive to sensation, because their high sensitivity also means they notice mood changes. It means they notice things in the world and paint it, and we wouldn't have noticed it and we're so grateful to see their painting. It means that they might be discerning fabric makers because they know what a smooth fabric is actually feeling like, and we are all the beneficiaries of those quirky things. We're all the beneficiaries. We have to stop acting like there's something wrong with that.

Matthew George ([00:49:08](#)):

Yeah, certainly. Winnie, final question. You've been so generous with your time. It's a strange moment right now. We're talking about sensory friendly solutions so we want to leave our listeners with this final question, this final thought from you. What are your personal strategies to reduce the noise of the current era? What are you doing day to day that keeps it whole?

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:49:29](#)):

I'm so glad you're asking that because we all have to pay attention to this right now, don't we?

Matthew George ([00:49:34](#)):

Yeah.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:49:35](#)):

I have really set my mind to more doing. I love to cook, so all the verbs in the kitchen. Chopping, and smelling, and stirring, and tasting and experimenting. I've done a lot of reading. OTs back in the day when I went to school, we had to learn lots of crafts and things so I've been knitting and crocheting. I dance by myself in my house with the music. There was a guy on Instagram that was having a dance party every afternoon for 30 minutes, and I did that. My family had a video challenge where we had to each post a video of us dancing to some music and we did this huge production that had ... He had lights and flashers. I mean, it was crazy lip-synching.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:50:49](#)):

But also, just finding new ways to play. I have a piano and I'm not good at playing the piano, but I'm really clear with myself. I'm not good at seeing either, but it isn't about how it sounds to you or how it looks to you, it's how it feels to me. So singing and playing the piano, and just having time to think about things. I've also limited how much news I watch. I have certain commentators that feel more authentic in the way they talk, and they have conversations like we're having with their guests instead of ... They have real conversations, and so I really only watch those.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:51:43](#)):

I dress up every day, I put jewelry on and come upstairs to work. A couple of days I know a lot of people just stay in their yoga pants or stay in their whatever, it got me really depressed and anxious. So I get an outfit out, I get dressed, I put on my jewelry. People tease me on Zoom. They're looking for what my accessories are today. So, I do that. Also, all of my passwords are ... I mean, they're still strong but they all are an affirmation. I figured out a way for every password to be an affirmation of some sort, either with initials and combinations of numbers, but it always is an affirmation so that when I have to type it, it's like a brief reminder that you're okay, you're great, you're good, you're funny, whatever it is. Sometimes we think about all these big things like we're missing a big vacation, but the truth is that

everyday routines are the richness of your life. Find ways to ... So, having to write those affirmations when I type my password is ironically, a really good thing.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:53:13](#)):

I also have looked for immersive stories are a series like on Netflix or those streaming services where there's eight episodes and you have to wonder what's going on, and it takes you out of what you're in right now. My husband and I been watching foreign ones because we really have to pay attention to read the subtitles and we can't be doing anything else. It gets us focused on being there together and watching the film. Sometimes we have to go back because the subtitle goes away faster than I can read, but like that. Do you see how that just takes all your cognition and you don't have anything left for the other stuff? So, those are some of the things I've been doing.

Matthew George ([00:54:01](#)):

Well, Winnie That's fantastic and we thank you so much for being a part of the Sensory Friendly Solutions Podcast. I feel lucky to have spoken to you on Election Day, although this will come out a week from now. We're really hoping for everyone south of the border for a peaceful and engaged election night. Thank you again for being a part of this meaningful project. We love speaking to you.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:54:22](#)):

Oh, my gosh. Thank you so much for inviting me. This was really fun. I appreciate it so much.

Matthew George ([00:54:28](#)):

Well, we're glad to hear it. Thank you so much, Dr. Dunn. Be safe, be well.

Dr. Winnie Dunn ([00:54:33](#)):

Okay, you be sensational.

Matthew George ([00:54:36](#)):

Awesome, thank you. Thank you, Winnie, bye-bye. Hello, listeners. Welcome back to the reflection segment of episode eight of the Sensory Friendly Solutions Podcast. We have Christel again in the hot seat. Christel, Welcome.

Christel ([00:54:54](#)):

Hi, Matt.

Matthew George ([00:54:56](#)):

How are you? It's Friday afternoon.

Christel ([00:54:58](#)):

It is. Yes, it is. It's been a good week. It's been a busy week, yeah.

Matthew George ([00:55:04](#)):

Good. So, we reached Dr. Winnie Dunn from Missouri. She very politely asked me to call her Winnie throughout the course of the conversation. We had a great time. Before we get into the content, I

thought it was actually pretty special that we reached her, or happened to reach her on Election Day in America. You and I are on the east coast of Canada, but obviously we pay very close attention to our brothers and sisters south of the border, so it was interesting that we reached her on that pivotal day.

Christel ([00:55:36](#)):

Yes. What a time to be talking about just all the feelings, the information coming at us. The feeling of overload and of being a little overly stimulated by the news and having lots of anxiety and worry about that. It was interesting, Dr. Dunn, Winnie started her chat with you just with a bit of a perspective that such a ... She started with hope. She started and finished with hope. She started with this perspective that at a complex time, what we're experiencing, having to go through an election during a pandemic and a time of great uncertainty, but she gave this anticipation that complex times are often followed by great breakthroughs. That complexity in the world activates people together and we start paying attention to different things.

Matthew George ([00:56:57](#)):

We also talked about in that vein, we talked about how control can overwhelm us or lack thereof, and one thing I highlighted while I was writing my notes for the episode when we talked about ... There has been a theme throughout the course of the podcast where we've been trying to give name to certain things, and we actually have talked to many people. I would say three at a minimum, four at the most who actually have been pioneers at a time when this was an emerging field. As Dr. Dunn said, she's well seasoned, which I thought was [inaudible 00:57:33], and it's good to talk to people who have been in this industry for a long time. What she said about this aspect of naming things is, it's human nature that we can only act on something if it's tangible. What we're lacking right now is knowing what to do, is our lack of sense of control over the current moment and she spoke really intelligently about how they're experiencing that firsthand in a really unique way in America.

Christel ([00:58:01](#)):

Yeah. She talked about the next step being the ability to take action and that without that sense of uncertainty, that sense of knowing, that sense of confusion is challenging, but that with information ... I found that that interesting, how that tied in a bit to our conversation last week with Stella Waterhouse is that we still need to provide good knowledge. Dr. Dunn talked about the importance of evidence based information. That there's a flood of information out there, everyone sharing everything all of the time. But as Stella spoke to last week, there's still a need to focus that. And why we're having these conversations with people, yeah, sensory overload is being searched thousands, 10s of thousands of times a month, but these deep dives are still important.

Christel ([00:59:08](#)):

We still need to direct people, provide guidance and knowledge so that they can take action. That they can take the next step and have the information that they need to move forward. Dr. Dunn talked about just with her career path and her sense of discovery, the ability to change her mind with new information, the ability to change what she does with new information. I think in sensory processing, in dealing with sensory challenges and trying to find sensory solutions, that ability to persist, to glean and learn new information and then change what you do is incredibly powerful.

Matthew George ([00:59:57](#)):

Yeah. You mentioned episode seven of the podcast with Stella Waterhouse, and we've just recently released a full blog post on that episode. We managed to reach Stella just days before a federally mandated lockdown in the UK that will last until December 2nd. We talked about the effects of that, and obviously getting the input of the UK cohort and the American cohort is really unique because we're not experiencing that on the east coast of Canada. But I wanted to bring us back to Stella just for a minute because, Stella was also in the vanguard when this was an emerging field. And as an industry outsider new to the industry, knowing that an emerging field evolves as it goes ...

Matthew George ([01:00:46](#)):

I mean, we're talking to Dr. Dunn who has had even before her tenure at the University of Missouri, a 36-year post at another university. The depth of that understanding, and I asked them both is, "How has the field changed and evolved?" Now it isn't an emerging field, or maybe it is, but I wanted to get your input on this idea of ... We've spoken to lots of folks who were there as the vanguard in a really emerging field. Now it's getting into the public consciousness a little bit here in 2020. Do you ever think about that? I mean, you started in '96. Do you ever think about that? The fact that this has become mainstream now in some ways?

Christel ([01:01:25](#)):

Very much. So. I remember sitting in university many years ago. I don't quite have the longevity of Stella or Winnie, but certainly long enough. We had one course on sensory processing. One, and it was presented a little bit as this new fangled thing that they were gracefully going to allow were teaching assistant to talk to us about because it was very important to this teaching assistant who had studied in California and she presented, and that was that. Now we're at a place where Dr. Dunn is sharing the insights and perspective that, "Hey, we all do quirky things." Some people show us a more intense version. She really adopted a principle of love the quirky, love your quirks. It's not something to be ... She used the word disparaged, right? Celebrate it, it makes you, you. We've talked about that as well. What makes you, you, find strength in that as a solution.

Matthew George ([01:02:49](#)):

I loved how she ended the podcast with a note to our listeners, be sensational. That comes from a really, really cleverly titled book which he wrote in 2007, called Living Sensationally, where she tells these stories of our quirks. We actually feature that book in our upcoming innovation segment. Christel, we had a long episode this week. In an effort to preserve our timing, to respect the time of our listenership, let's get maybe one final reflection from you if you have one.

Christel ([01:03:22](#)):

Yeah. It's the one thing I'm just looking at my notes, Matt, that I have highlighted along the lines of, we're sensory beings. Human beings are sensory beings and processing, we have to look at ... Processing our senses, it's fundamental to who we are and what we do, and it's a tool to do other things better.

Matthew George ([01:03:53](#)):

Hello, listeners. Welcome back to the final segment of episode eight of the Sensory Friendly Solutions Podcast with the great Dr. Winnie Dunn. This is the stage of the podcast that you have written in to tell us you're really enjoying. We give you the tips, the tactics, the tools, the strategies, the resources to better navigate the current time, to live a good life, to live a sensory friendly life, and this innovation segment is no different. In fact, it's excellent because we get to draw off of the wonderful mind of

another industry leader. From Dr. Winnie Dunn, this is her book Living Sensationally. If you noticed at the very end of our conversation, she signed off by saying, "Be sensational." It didn't occur to me at the time, but it's in reference to her book called Living Sensationally: Understanding Your Senses.

Matthew George ([01:04:59](#)):

Now, this was published in 2007 but has stood the test of time. You can get this on Amazon, you can get this on her website. It has a really fun description on Amazon, and I'm going to read it for you. How do you feel when you bite into a pear, wear a feather boa, stick stand in a noisy auditorium, or look for a friend in a crowd? Living Sensationally explains how people's individual sensory patterns affect the way we react to everything that happens to us throughout the day. Some people will adore the grainy texture of a pear, while others will shudder at the idea of this texture in their mouths. Touching a feather boa will be fun and luxurious to some, and others will bristle at the idea of all those feathers brushing on the skin. Noisy, busy environments will energize some, and will overwhelm others. Armed with the information in Living Sensationally, people will be able to pick just the right kind of clothing, job and home, and know why they are making such choices.

Matthew George ([01:06:08](#)):

What I love about it, it's a chance for us to better understand ourselves as this podcast has been from the very get go. She also mentions some really fascinating individuals in American culture right now. We happened to record the podcast episode on Election Day in America, which is fascinating within and of itself. She talks about Stacey Abrams from Georgia who's done some great podcasts that I encourage you to check out. She talks about Vivek Murthy, who is a former Surgeon General of America. His recent book called, Together, on loneliness, a loneliness epidemic. It was a fascinating discussion. Pick up these resources, understand yourself a little bit better, check out Dr. Winnie Dunn further, and we'll see you next week for episode nine of the Sensory Friendly Solutions Podcast.

Matthew George ([01:07:09](#)):

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