

Sensory stimulation

Good practice for quality dementia care. An A-Z of strategies, checklists and tools

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Sensory stimulation is important for overall emotional wellbeing. It can convey emotional support, affection and respect. Along with opportunities for sexual expression, it can improve quality of life and wellbeing.

Sensory stimulation plays a major part in aiding communication while also helping reduce agitation, sleep disturbances and unmet need.

General strategies

- ▶ Provide access to annual tests and updated aids for hearing and vision.
- ▶ Include sensory enrichment and comfort in staff training, with a focus on the need for coordinated strategies for sensory enrichment.
- ▶ Build sensory stimulation into care programs.
- ▶ Be inventive in finding sources of enrichment for older people whose emotional wellbeing is at risk.
- ▶ Offer group experiences and outings to cater for individual tastes and interests. Games, quizzes, craft groups, gardening or pottery groups, outings, concerts, exercise programs, cooking, food tasting, sing-alongs, religious services and spiritual events can give sensory stimulation.

- ▶ Be conscious of the impact of lighting, flowers, décor, access to gardens and sunshine. Music and television can stimulate in a beneficial way, but can irritate and create communication barriers. Try to reduce competing noise sources and control volume to meet the wishes of those who cannot control noise levels themselves.
- ▶ Offer hand and hair treatment, spa baths, massage and access to sensory gardens as part of care.

Try to create a balanced amount of stimulation, enough to keep an older person from getting too bored but not so much that they become agitated. Too much noise, activity, people and visual stimulation can create overload for people with dementia, although in some cultures, a noisy, busy environment may be enjoyed as a normal part of life.

Specific strategies

Touch

- ▶ Massage hands, head, back and shoulders.
- ▶ Offer manicures and hair care.
- ▶ Hold hands.
- ▶ Offer spa baths.
- ▶ Offer different tactile opportunities with the rugs, throws, cushions and clothing you provide.

- ▶ Provide daily life experiences like gardening, food handling and animal therapy, for example hens on-site or visitors with pets.
- ▶ Provide exercise and movement to music.
- ▶ Enjoy activities in sunshine in moderate amounts.

Sight

- ▶ Provide appropriate lighting and outdoor views.
- ▶ Use bright colours in activity rooms and restful colours in lounge and dining areas.
- ▶ Take care with food presentation, contrasting colours on the plate.
- ▶ Take care with people's personal appearance, including clothing, jewellery and makeup.
- ▶ Place plants and flowers indoors wherever suitable.
- ▶ Make gardens easy to get to.
- ▶ Hang non-abstract paintings on walls and place photographs wherever appropriate.

Sensory stimulation (continued)

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Taste

- ▶ Provide interesting and varied meals.
- ▶ Introduce people to new and varied tastes, for example different cultural dishes, fruit and vegetables, after first finding out their likes and dislikes.
- ▶ Provide tasting activities: bitter/sour/sweet/salt etc.

Hearing

- ▶ Provide music experiences such as dancing, listening, singing, clapping, shaking musical implements and swaying.
- ▶ Play recorded music or put on TV shows. Avoid too much volume and loud advertisements on commercial radio or TV.
- ▶ Talk with people.
- ▶ Have group games, debates, quizzes and concerts.

Smell

- ▶ Be aware of the power of scents and aromas.
- ▶ Place scented flowers in the facility.
- ▶ Use aromatherapy.
- ▶ Use perfumed massage creams and oils.
- ▶ Create a sensory garden with herbs.
- ▶ Be aware of the pleasure of food smells like coffee, fresh herbs and lemon.

One example of a sensory enrichment program is Sonas aPc. This program, designed to activate communication in people with dementia, offers gentle stimulation of the five senses. The DVD has familiar music and songs, with simple instructions for each stage of the program. Experiences include gentle exercise, singing, massage, music-making, tasting and smelling. The DVD also includes cued speech to encourage people to complete common sayings and poems. The visual element is provided by the faces and movement of the people on the DVD and its bright banners and balloons.

Sonas aPc. Available at:

www.sonasapc.ie/approach.html

For related information, see the following checklists

- ▶ Activities: living with meaning and purpose
- ▶ Eating: checklist for positive experiences
- ▶ Home-like environment checklist
- ▶ Independence
- ▶ Life and design for people with dementia
- ▶ Personal enjoyment: participation and engagement