

Some starter tips on creating and using a sensory room

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Current Activities research reporter

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) encourage nursing homes to use sensory rooms as part of their effort to improve the lives of their residents with dementia. Yet, evidence shows that many facilities don't have one, and when they do, it is often underused or used inappropriately, mostly because of lack of funds, space, and training. This article offers advice on how to create a sensory room at affordable costs and how to use it effectively and safely.

Also known as multisensory environments (MSEs), sensory rooms are intended for the delivery of multisensory stimulation to elders with impaired cognition. They provide stimulation of the primary senses (i.e., smell, touch, hearing, and sight) through pleasurable experiences, in a calming atmosphere of soft colors, music, and lights.

What the research says

Dr. Heather Waterman, professor of nursing at the University of Manchester, in the United Kingdom, writes in the journal *Dementia*: "The use of MSEs is considered a positive adjunct to the meaningful care of older people with dementia, particularly, in terms of affording a medium through which communication may be facilitated."

Sensory rooms appear particularly effective at improving the patients' ability to talk and interact with others. In a randomized trial published in the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, persons with moderate to severe dementia who attended two 30-minute sessions per week in a sensory room for one month talked more often and more spontaneously. They also appeared happier, less bored, and more alert.

Other studies report higher levels of feelings of well-being and declines in the frequency and severity of problem

behaviors, which, in turn, helped reduce the use of restraints.

For all budgets

Sensory rooms installed by commercial manufacturers can cost \$7,000- \$80,000, and some nursing homes feel they cannot afford them. (If you can... go for it, as they're the ultimate in therapeutic experiences for your elders.)

But sensory rooms don't need to be expensive or huge and elaborate to be therapeutic. They can be created at relatively low cost and in a limited space. Most importantly, they can be developed over time, as more funds and features become available. This has the advantage that you can see what works best for your residents and shape the room accordingly, ensuring its ongoing therapeutic effectiveness without wasting resources.

Before you start

Once you have decided how much you can afford to spend, there are a few important things to consider before you start buying anything.

First, the sensory needs of your elders. These vary greatly among individuals. For instance, residents who are withdrawn need

activities that stimulate their senses, whereas agitated ones require experiences that soothe their senses and promote relaxation.

An occupational therapist with sensory room training or another specialized consultant can help you assess the unique sensory needs of each resident and suggest ways to meet them. Having a clear understanding of who needs what will help you decide what to buy.

Also, consider how many elders will use the room at the same time, as the smaller the group, the less complicated and expensive the project will be.

Find the right place

The next step is finding a place to install the sensory room. This should be

- big enough to accommodate your group;
- located in a quiet but not isolated area of the building;
- away from areas with strong smells; and
- fully accessible to wheelchair users.

If space is an issue, check for rooms that are underutilized. If a whole room is not available, consider creating a "sensory area" in a corner of a room, to be used with one resident at a time.

What you need

Tina Champagne, M.Ed., OTR, occupational therapist at the Department of Behavioral Health Services of Cooley-Dickinson Hospital, Northampton, Massachusetts, has created one of these rooms. She is currently using it successfully with patients with mild to severe cognitive impairment, some who are older than 100.

"It's a nice space where we do activities and use equipment which is modified for those folks," she told *Care Guide*. "They just love it, including sitting in the beanbag chairs!"

Developing a sensory room can be a fun project to work at, and you don't need much to start with. Some starter ideas include:

- Bubble tubes.
- A mirror ball.
- A projector with effects wheels.
- Fiber optic lamps.
- Comfortable chairs.
- Audio equipment and relaxing music tapes.
- A TV with nature videos.

You can purchase these items for relatively small prices on the Internet, at garage sales, or at local stores. Suggestion: Try finding a sponsor who is willing to make a donation toward the cost of these items in exchange for the publicity involved, or organizing a sensory room fundraising event, like a fair or a bingo evening.

Depending on how much you have to spend, you may consider buying large posters with nature scenes, a rocking or



Detail of the ceiling, before (left) and after (right) the intervention of the volunteers. (Photo by Dr. Kevin Hope, University of Manchester, UK.)

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beanbag chair, cushions, and weighted blankets. A fish tank, aroma diffusers, rope lights, and tabletop water features are also good ideas.

All items must be in good working order and safe and used according to the manufacturer's instructions. Fabrics and furniture must be fire resistant.

"You need to know the facility regulations," says Champagne, "before buying anything."

Make it a team effort

Champagne, who also trains nursing home staff on the use of sensory interventions, says the development process should be a team effort: "Staff and client involvement is important—especially in a nursing home that is actually peoples' home. So, they should give their input whenever possible."

Post and distribute leaflets in your unit to let them know about the project, and ask for help, donations, and ideas. Pay particular attention to suggestions from caregivers who are the closest to the residents, as they are in the best position to know what their elder would enjoy experiencing.

"Adding pet therapy is also a huge hit, usually," explains Champagne. "We have therapy dogs that visit regularly. Fish, birds, cats... this is all sensory too."

Setting things up

The idea behind a sensory room is to give the person with dementia a special place that has been designed and constructed with their needs in mind; an oasis that allows them to awake or to soothe their senses in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility. Consequently, anything that generates confusion or acts as a distraction, like busy patterns, bold colors, and too-bright lights, should be avoided.

Ideally, a sensory room for people with dementia should have:

- walls, curtains, and furniture in calming, soothing colors;
- subdued lighting; and
- a neat, uncluttered appearance.

Fiber optic lights, water features and other items should be at wheelchair level so that everybody can enjoy them. Then, perhaps hang rope lights around the top of the room for a relaxing, soft glowing light effect, creating delicate colored patterns on the walls with the projector.

You may want to backlight the bubble tubes with pastel-colored bulbs, so as to

enhance the effect of the bubbles rising up. And as finishing touches, have gentle music play softly in the background and some fragrance sprayed in the room. For the latter, consider what effect you want to achieve. Vanilla and lavender, for instance, are calming scents, whereas peppermint and cinnamon are stimulating.

For a "sensory corner," use curtains to separate it from the rest of the room and sheets to lower the ceiling and make the area more cozy.

Avoid mirrors or any highly reflective material, such as foil or glass panels. Persons with dementia may no longer be able to

recognize their reflection. They think that what they see is a stranger, which has been shown to trigger hallucinations and episodes of aggression. For the same reason, abstract projected images should be preferred to pictures.

Policies and procedures for use

Any sensory room must have a policy and procedure for use; that is, a document that sets out the requirements for using the room and its equipment. This should indicate—among other things—recommended ways to interact with residents; items stored in the room; number of residents allowed in the room at the same time; educational resources and/or manuals for equipment use; and procedures for taking items out of the room.

Precautions

The document should also provide information about precautions for use, such as infection control practices. It is commonly recommended that residents, staff and visitors wash their hands before entering a sensory room and that items for general, not individual, use be disinfected

between residents, at the end of sessions, or at the end of the day.

Be aware of health problems like allergies to fragrances, nickel, or latex. Avoid using strong scents with residents with COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), as they worsen their already compromised breathing. Also, certain natural sounds

may be upsetting for residents with dementia. These vary greatly from person to person, so you need to check first.

The December issue of the American Occupational Therapy Association's journal *Mental Health* emphasizes that "staff trainings must accompany the initiation... of the sensory room and the kind of treatment that may occur within it."

"Staff trainings generally include... sensory modulation, an introduction to the equipment contained within the room, treatment approaches,... safety considerations, contraindications, and policies and procedures for use of the sensory room." Furthermore, staff needs to be familiar with the principles of person-centered and dementia, care.

Sensory profile

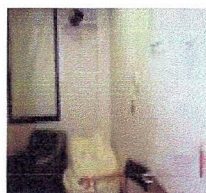
For each resident, prepare a "sensory profile" indicating most/least liked stimuli. Relevant information can be drawn from observations of the person during daily activities and from the resident and their family. This has to be done *before* the person starts using the sensory room.

Care plans, reporting time/day of the week in which residents use the room, activities provided, and intended therapeutic aims and outcomes, are also recommended.

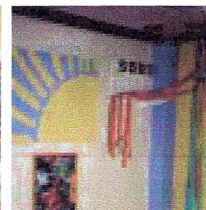
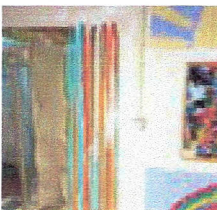
Address specific problems

Remember: Sensory rooms are for enjoyable, failure-free experiences. "There is no expectation of performance," report researchers of the University of Leicester, UK, in the journal *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*. "This removes demands on individuals to understand what they are experiencing, thus reducing the

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A view of a corner of the room, with a bubble tube and a projector on the left and a beanbag chair on the right, before (above) and after (below) the artwork was carried out. (Photo by Dr. Kevin Hope, University of Manchester, UK.)



tendency... to feel confused and withdrawn."

Simply being in a sensory room, comforted by the soothing sound of water and gentle music, calming colors and aromas, is, therefore, a therapeutic experience.

However, each resident has different problems that need to be addressed in a unique way. So, for example, depending on whether they are agitated or withdrawn, they will need different types of sensorial experiences, namely different music, light effects, colors, and fragrances. This means that in order to ensure their effectiveness, sensory rooms should be used each time by a group of residents with similar needs and preferences.

Conducting the session

When using the sensory room, "time should be spent introducing preferred stimuli and sharing the experience with the patient," explains Dr. Lesley Pinkney, lecturer in occupational therapy at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom.

"The focus should be on the sensory qualities of each piece... and the memories it provokes."

Other stimuli can be introduced as the session develops, but consider that presenting more than three different stimuli simultaneously is not usually recommended.

The session's length can be as little as 10 minutes, depending on the person's attention span.

Activities examples

Following are just some of the most commonly used sensory room activities for persons with dementia, as reported in the literature. Each one has a specific therapeutic goal.

Wilbarger protocol; helps reduce verbal and physical aggressive behavior. Using a soft scrub brush, gently and slowly brush the elder's arms, back and legs. Repeat several times, while talking with a calm, soothing tone of voice. Then, wrap the person in a weighted blanket. **(Weighted blankets are commonly used in sensory rooms. They can weigh up to 20 pounds and provide a pleasant sensation of comfort when wrapped up around the body.)**

Fiber optic sprays. Made up of hundreds of strands up to a few meters long, they can be wrapped around the body and manipulated safely. They provide a great visual and tactile experience, which helps stimulate elders with apathy and works

particularly well for involving grandchildren and great-grandchildren in the sensory room experience with the elder.

Air mat therapy. Recommended in guidelines from the National Guidelines Clearinghouse (NGC) to prevent agitation in Alzheimer's patients, it consists, at its simplest, of having the elder lay on a special vinyl mat attached to an air compressor to enjoy the calming stimulation provided by the jets of air through the mat's seams.

Aromatherapy massage. Gently massage the elder's hands, feet or back with their favorite scented lotion while gentle music is playing in the background. This technique promotes relaxation, soothes pain and... according to recent findings... can reduce repetitive yelling and screaming. Hand and/or feet massage can be given by a family member.

Reminiscence with music. This, too, is a wonderful activity when family members visit. With the person sitting in a rocking chair, use excerpts from their favorite songs to promote reminiscence, or read favorite stories, or look at items in their lifestyle scrapbook.

Popping soap bubbles or watching them as they form and move around helps prevent aggression and is another great, fun way to promote younger children's participation.

Sensory cart. This can give you more ideas for experiences to try with your elders and can be brought to those residents who can't use the room because they're bed bound. It may include balls of various textures, foam cubes, clay, scented lotions, and reminiscence items for the person to touch, search and discover. This technique helps improve rummaging, picking, and wandering behaviors. Avoid small, loose items, as persons with dementia tend to put everything in their mouth (a condition called hyperorality), which puts them at risk of choking.

"Again, it's important to consider if you want to assist with calming and decrease agitation, or with alerting by facilitating social contact and communication," notes Champagne.

Keep records of what sensory experiences work best for each resident and repeat them in the next sessions. Also, ensure supervision. No resident should be left alone in the room at any time.

Sensory rooms involve a whole new and unique therapeutic science, which can evolve and change with each elder. Because of the many types of sensory

room experiences and programs available, you'll want to read all you can about them and contact knowledgeable sensory consultants for advice and program development as much as possible.

Remember, above all, sensory rooms should be pleasurable and fun. They should be a place for everyone to enjoy and that families, children, and grandchildren are encouraged to share with their elders. The reward can be wonderful: a softly spoken word, a gentle smile, or that special look in their loved one's eyes that seemed lost forever.

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