

SENSORY STIMULATION

Introduction

Our senses... sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing connect our minds with the world around us. Many older adults experience difficulties with some of the senses. When this happens to a person with dementia, it can contribute to some of the confusion that is being experienced. Although people with dementia may not always be able to make sense of complicated sensory stimuli, they still derive enjoyment from pleasant sensations and is turned off by unpleasant ones. Stimulating the senses of the person with dementia has many positive benefits. There are no boundaries to sensory stimulation and it can include a variety of activities.

Benefits

Considerable attention has been given to exploring the benefits of sensory stimulation with older adults and specifically, people with dementia. Benefits include increased socialization, increased concentration, improved self-concept and increased alertness.

Many benefits have been found by creating an environment that gently stimulates all of the senses. Although we have listed many specific activities, it is important to constantly keep an environment active, offering opportunities for stimulating as many senses as possible, and being careful not to give unsuitable stimulation, which could cause anxiety.

It is valuable to draw on emotions and memories by getting in touch with all 5 senses. You'll never know the memories that will arise through different processes.

Smell

The sense of smell is one of the most meaningful in terms of connecting us to our past and bringing back memories. No matter what your age and abilities are, smells have a powerful effect. They can be pleasant, strong, relaxing, or comforting, and can elicit many emotions. Think of how you feel when you smell a warm batch of bread baking in the oven and the memories it brings to mind.

PROVINCIAL - WINNIPEG 10-120 DONALD ST R3C 4G2 204-943-6622 alzmb@alzheimer.mb.ca

INTERLAKE / EASTERN - SELKIRK
384 EVELINE STREET R1A 1N3
TEL: 204-268-4752 FAX: 204-268-4799
EMAIL: alzne@alzheimer.mb.ca

NORTH CENTRAL - PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE
218 Saskatchewan Ave. E R1N 0K9
TEL: 204-239-4898 FAX: 204-239-0902
EMAIL: alznc@alzheimer.mb.ca

PARKLAND - DAUPHIN
118 MAIN STREET NORTH R7N 1C2
TEL: 204-638-4483 FAX: 204 638-4493
EMAIL: alzprk@alzheimer.mb.ca

SOUTH CENTRAL - WINKLER
#105 - 650 SOUTH RAILWAY AVENUE R6W 0L6
TEL: 204-325-5634 FAX: 204-325-6496
EMAIL: alzsc@alzheimer.mb.ca

SOUTH EASTMAN - STEINBACH
9A - 90 BRANDT STREET R5G 0T3
TEL: 204-326-5771 FAX: 204-326-5799
EMAIL: alzse@alzheimer.mb.ca

WESTMAN - BRANDON
UNIT 4B-457 9TH STREET R7A 1K2
TEL: 204-729-8320 FAX: 204-726-1082
EMAIL: alzwm@alzheimer.mb.ca

Consider:

- Baking, or using other distinct smells, such as:

coffee	rose water	mint	ginger
lavender	perfume or aftershave	cinnamon	herbal tea
orange	vanilla	herbs	baby powder

- Try to identify a smell or use it for reminiscing.
- The aroma diffuser is growing in popularity. With this, you select the scented oil you want and use some means of diffusion to spread the aroma.

Sight

No matter what your preferences are, it is pleasing to view something you consider beautiful or memorable.

Consider:

- Using bright and fun or soft colours with a person with dementia. These colours can be quite engaging and pleasant. When using fabrics, however, avoid complex patterns, as it might be confusing for the person.
- Looking at pictures or watching TV shows consisting of beautiful scenery, animals (if they derive joy from animals), or beautiful lights.
- Looking at pictures or shows of places that they've visited or lived is also a great reminiscing instrument. Often it is a picture of a place, a person or event that triggers a memory more than just words. An example could be a picture of a baby that reminds of a birth or a picture of a steamer or a large fisher boat that would remind of coming to Canada or a memorable trip. Please see information on Reminiscing for more details.
- Art appreciation – looking at paintings, sculptures and other forms of visual art.

Touch

Meaningful touch can be an extremely important communication tool with people with dementia. Whether it is a hug, a handshake, or simply holding hands, touching elicits an emotional response that is unparalleled. Even basic touching, such as a touch on the shoulder should be incorporated into any interaction.

Consider:

- An activity such as giving someone a manicure, doing their hair or giving a massage, can often leave that person relaxed and with a sense of being worthy of being touched.

- Animals provide an unconditional love and, in turn, need love and care from humans. Confirm that the person enjoys pets first and then bring in an animal. This can help the person feel needed and highly valued. It can also be useful for reminiscence.
- Identifying everyday objects in a deep bag or pieces of material of different textures. Turn it into a reminiscence activity if you have a group.
- You could also pick something out of a basin of water, such as soap or a sponge, or use play-dough or clay. These can all help strengthen the person's hands.

Hearing

Listening to sounds is a very important aspect of getting in touch with our senses. Although many older adults have hearing impairments, it is still important to stimulate this sense, keeping in mind that modifications may need to be made.

Consider:

- Listening to music, sounds of nature, singing, or poetry can all be very enjoyable, when done right. It is very important to remember to be sensitive to the person's choice. Often, music or some other noise can be enjoyable for one person but can be irritating and even aggravating for someone else.
- It is important to remember to keep the noise level controlled. Too much noise can be frustrating for a person with dementia. It can cause the person to feel anxious or unsettled.

Taste

Food can bring back many memories.

Consider:

- If possible, it can be pleasurable to share with meals or foods from their childhood and even prepare these together.
- Sweets and even special drinks can be a nice treat and going out to find these either at a candy store or an old eatery can be even better.

PROVINCIAL - WINNIPEG 10-120 DONALD ST R3C 4G2 204-943-6622 alzmb@alzheimer.mb.ca

INTERLAKE / EASTERN - SELKIRK
384 EVELINE STREET R1A 1N3
TEL: 204-268-4752 FAX: 204-268-4799
EMAIL: alzne@alzheimer.mb.ca

NORTH CENTRAL - PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE
218 Saskatchewan Ave. E R1N 0K9
TEL: 204-239-4898 FAX: 204-239-0902
EMAIL: alznc@alzheimer.mb.ca

PARKLAND - DAUPHIN
118 MAIN STREET NORTH R7N 1C2
TEL: 204-638-4483 FAX: 204 638-4493
EMAIL: alzprk@alzheimer.mb.ca

SOUTH CENTRAL - WINKLER
#105 - 650 SOUTH RAILWAY AVENUE R6W 0L6
TEL: 204-325-5634 FAX: 204-325-6496
EMAIL: alzsc@alzheimer.mb.ca

SOUTH EASTMAN - STEINBACH
9A - 90 BRANDT STREET R5G 0T3
TEL: 204-326-5771 FAX: 204-326-5799
EMAIL: alzse@alzheimer.mb.ca

WESTMAN - BRANDON
UNIT 4B-457 9TH STREET R7A 1K2
TEL: 204-729-8320 FAX: 204-726-1082
EMAIL: alzwm@alzheimer.mb.ca

Theme Kits

An enjoyable activity that can be done individually or in a group is that of theme activity. These are bags or boxes of items that relate to a particular theme.

For instance, if you wanted to talk about memories of winter or simply the season itself, you could fill a kit with:

Mittens	Paper snowflake	Cassette tape of Christmas/winter music
Gift box	Sleigh bells	Real snow to touch and handle (if it's winter)
Christmas cake	Snowman figurine	Cinnamon sticks

As dementia progresses...

The activities suggested in this document are not limited to the experience of any particular point in the disease. In fact, different experiences have been shown to have benefits for the person earlier on in their progression while some have been more suitable for the person experiencing more advanced symptoms of dementia. Although this information mainly explores the sensory activities that work best when the individual maintains some form of verbal communication, it is important to remember that connecting with the senses later on in the disease is often a valuable way to communicate with the person.

Visit the Alzheimer Society of Manitoba website for further reading.

<https://alzheimer.mb.ca/we-can-help/further-reading/>