

What's the Sense? The Benefits of Multi-Sensory Environments in Long-Term Care

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Envision a place where you are free to explore, dream, imagine, feel, reminisce, and relax. A place that offers hope, peace, joy, closeness, understanding, acceptance, solace, comfort, reflection, elation, movement, stimulation, and relief. Is it possible for a resident to experience a place like this amongst the hustle and bustle of long-term care facility life? The answer is simple: Yes, in a Multi-Sensory Environment.

“Multi-sensory” refers to the technique of providing stimulation to all six senses in accordance with the individual needs and interests of the resident, and may be offered in a variety of ways in the long-term care setting. More and more facilities are creating an actual room dedicated for this purpose, with colorful lights, soothing music, curious textures, the sights and sounds of water bubble towers, and fragrances of chamomile, lavender, or rosemary. Other facilities create an oasis in a corner of the day room, or hallway. Facilities may also use a traveling approach where equipment is set up on carts and offered to residents in the comfort and privacy of their own rooms. Some facilities may even provide all of these approaches.

With the implementation of the new CMS Activities Guidance to Surveyors, long-term care facilities are looking for ways to comply with the heightened focus of the interdisciplinary approaches to quality of life. Multi-sensory environments are a great way to offer facility staff, volunteers, clergy, family members and so on, an opportunity to spend quality time with the residents, in an environment that is therapeutic, soothing, and most importantly, enjoyable, for all. But, do not create these “sense-sational” environments simply to comply with the new survey process. The multitudes of benefits to the residents are far greater than any regulatory guidance or compliance.

The primary objectives and benefits of multi-sensory environments are to improve quality of life and promote enjoyment of a leisure experience. However, other objectives and benefits may include:

- Enhanced self-esteem
- Heightened awareness of environment
- Increased communication
- Improved relationship between caregivers and residents
- Reduction of tension, anxiety, and agitation
- Increased responses to visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory and olfactory stimuli
- Opportunities for relaxation, solace and pain management
- Reduction of agitation and anxiety
- Increased attention span
- Opportunities for emotional expression
- Stress reduction for staff, family, volunteers and visitors

Since multi-sensory environments offer such an array of possibilities, many residents can benefit from this program. Examples include residents who have Alzheimer's disease or other dementia; are agitated, restless, or at risk for falls; demonstrate little to no response to external stimuli or have activity deficits; experience acute or chronic pain; or individuals with impaired communication skills or perceptual abilities. These multifaceted environments may also be used during mealtimes as a diversion from the sight and smells of food for residents on feeding tubes; used before meal times to stimulate the appetite; or before naps or bedtime to promote healthy sleep. Many facilities use this approach as part of their fall prevention program as well as in the reduction of chemical and physical restraints.

More and more research is being done on the benefits of multi-sensory environments, however, quality of life is so difficult to define and measure. It is recommended that each facility monitor the residents' responses and progress in this specialized program. There are many ways in which Activity or facility staff can gather statistical data for Quality Assurance projects, reports, research, grant applications, and more. The following are just a few:

- Record responses to various forms of stimulation (The "Sensory Program Record of Responses" monitoring tool is available at www.recreativeresources.com/documentationforms.htm)
- Monitor changes in responses and include in progress notes and care plans
- Measure behavior before, during and after the program
- Measure pain before, during and after the program
- Record attendance on Participation Sheets to monitor service consumption
- Perform Activity Audits to ensure the program is being facilitated safely and appropriately

The developments of these spectacular multi-sensory rooms are rapidly growing throughout North America. If your facility is contemplating creating this program, remember that the benefits are endless. So, when you ask, "What's the sense?" I say, "It makes no sense not to do it!"