

Sensory awareness may provide a strategy to reduce stress for both the person living with dementia and the carer. It can be helpful for a carer to be mindful of the stimuli occurring in the environment, taking note of any positive or negative responses. For optimal outcomes try to create a balanced amount of stimulation, enough to keep the person from becoming bored, but not overloaded so as to increase agitation.

## Various Triggers for Sensory Imbalance

Overstimulation	Under Stimulation
Bright lights	Not seeing familiar objects or people
Too much noise or too many people	Being in an unfamiliar environment
Too much clutter	Being alone for extended periods of time
Too many choices	Sameness in days
Not enough personal space	Bland food not to their liking
Unwanted touch	Lack of caring touch
Too many senses stimulated at once	Lack of exposure to music, smells, nature

### *Consequences of Sensory Imbalance.*

- Stimuli avoidance – wanting to be removed from that environment.
- Stimuli seeking – wandering, asking for family, asking to go home.
- Emotional outbursts– pacing, repetitions, anxiety, agitation.
- General confusion

## **Hearing**    *Sounds are on top of the list*

- Quietly sit and listen to the surrounding noises, how many sounds there are and where they are coming from, pleasant or unpleasant. Inside and/or outside.
- Provide musical experiences such as dancing, listening, singing, or simply just swaying.
- Play recorded music or put on appropriate TV shows. Avoid too much volume and loud advertisements on commercial radio or TV.
- Talk with people.
- Use reminiscence as a regular tool.

## Sight

- Observe nonverbal cues – the persons posture, movements, or facial expressions
- What can the person see from where they are sitting: is it unpleasant or relaxing?
- Don't assume the person sees things the way we do, e.g. if they bring a cup to a door may indicate they are thirsty, and they see the handle as the tap.
- Be mindful of the person's personal appearance, e.g. clothing, jewellery, and makeup.
- Ensure appropriate lighting and views to outside.
- Provide contrasting colours when serving a meal.
- Think about indoor plants and flowers.
- Place photographs and mementoes around the room.

## **Touch** *Nurturing touch - can take over when words no longer have meaning.*

- Be mindful of the persons personal space and gauge what is right.
- The person may ask for their mother (this could relate to longing for that mother bond). Just sitting next to them with your arm around them may help.
- Be mindful of the persons individual experiences: e.g. water spraying on their back in the shower may feel like being smacked, and having hair combed may feel painful.
- Sometimes sitting down may increase anxiety due to the person feeling they will fall through the space, particularly on the toilet. Holding their hands and lowering you both slightly may provide some reassurance.
- Be particularly mindful of the difference in temperatures (water and general).
- Try to get person to test the water with you before stepping into shower but be aware the water may also feel colder on entire body than when tested on the hand.
- Always approach the person from the front and slowly.

### *Types of Nurturing Touch*

- Massage hands, head, back and shoulders.
- Offer manicures and hair care.
- Just hold hands, sit with an arm around the shoulder.
- Offer different tactile experiences with blankets, cushions, and clothing, or a tactile blanket, basket or toolbox.
- Additional tactile experiences e.g. gardening, food handling or pets.
- Include exercise and movement to music.
- Try to enjoy some outside activities every day, weather permitting.

## Taste

*Sensory Eating - sensory enrichment involves more than just serving food.*

- Turn the TV or radio off during meals or provide quiet classical music (observe for positive or negative responses).
- Pause in between every bite of food.
- Support the person to assist in preparation and clearing at mealtimes, as this may be a way for the person to be more involved in decision making.
- Be mindful of the persons pace as they take each bite and try to match that pace.
- Use this opportunity to slow your own eating down and enjoy every bite. Become mindful of how these impacts on your eating experience. (mindful eating)
- When possible, offer regular meals at same time and place.
- How you present the meal can impact on the persons appetite and eating experience.
- Don't overwhelm the person with too many food choices in one meal.
- Try to offer varied meals to include new tastes, being mindful of their likes and dislikes.
- Make sure person is sitting close enough to the table to reach food and drink.
- Prompt and support the person to eat but don't take over. Ask if they need help rather than just doing. If necessary, explore adapted utensils.

**Smell** - *try to encompass a pleasant smell environment.*

- Be mindful of scents and aromas, natural where possible.
- Aromatherapy may be used with caution: always refer to a suitably qualified professional as some oils can interfere with medications.
- Use perfumed massage creams, again with caution, be aware of allergies and possible negative effects.
- Grow herbs.
- Offer smells like coffee, fresh herbs, and lemon.
- Avoid scented candles as they can be seen as a fire, and can become a safety hazard.