

5 TIPS for caregivers

MULTI-SENSORY ENVIRONMENTS

Depending on what field you're in, when you hear the term MSE you might think of anything from Masters of Science in Engineering to the Montreal Stock Exchange. For caregivers of someone with dementia, the most common term is a Multi-Sensory Environment – or at least it should be! While not well known to the general population, Multi-Sensory Environments can be a great therapeutic tool to calm those who are anxious or agitated, or engage those who are passive or withdrawn. Learn more about MSEs!

1 What is a Multi-Sensory Environment?

Multi-Sensory Environments are often designed with two goals in mind: (1) to promote intellectual activity through stimulating the senses, and (2) to encourage relaxation and well-being. According to the American Association of Multi-Sensory Environments, an MSE is “a dedicated room that attempts to block out noise, control space, temperature, and lighting. It is an artificially created venue that brings together multi-sensory equipment in one place to stimulate the senses. This venue promotes pleasure and/or feelings of well-being. It can be utilized as part of learning, treatment, recreation and/or the relaxation experience. It relieves stress, anxiety and pain.” These dedicated rooms allow sensory stimulation to be controlled, presented in isolation or combination (sight only, versus sight, touch, and smell), and matched to the interest of the participant. So you're probably thinking, okay it's a room, but what exactly goes in a MSE? What kind of room is it? MSE rooms could include lighting effects (projectors, bubble tubes, fiber optics, spotlights), sensory activities (blowing bubbles, play dough), tactile experiences (items with various textures), sound effects (music, nature sounds, animal sounds), and more. Again, the goal is to create a controlled environment where all senses can be stimulated as needed. For example, one participant might love to go in the room with all the lights on, music playing, fabric to touch, and be looking for more stimulation. Others might be completely overwhelmed with this, and enjoy focusing on one item at a time.

2 Who should use an MSE?

Multi-Sensory Environments can be used for just about anyone! They are typically used therapeutically for those with cognitive impairments or developmental disabilities; everything from Autism to PTSD to dementia. Anyone with high stress, agitation, anxiety, or pain can often benefit. Due to limitations such as movement, vision, hearing, or cognitive impairments, these individuals often experience the world differently. Sensory stimulation from an

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MSE can provide opportunities to overcome these obstacles and increase enjoyment of life. The room can be used as a tool for achieving specific therapeutic goals, or simply as a fun leisure activity for relaxation. Overall, Multi-Sensory Environments help individuals create positive self-esteem and well-being.

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3 When is an MSE used?

There is no set time or schedule that a Multi-Sensory Environment should be used, and researchers are still examining the effects of sensory stimulation based on usage. However, since it is such a person-centered therapy, this principle applies equally as to when to use the room – use it when the person can benefit! For example, it is common to see individuals become more anxious at the end of the day. Whether from sundowning, or at our day center from the increased activity level of family members arriving and participants being picked up, this would be a prime example of an ideal time to use the MSE for individuals who are easily anxious or agitated. By going into a separate MSE room all of this outside stimuli is eliminated, and the person can focus simply on the sensory stimulation in front of them.

4 Where are there MSEs?

Multi-Sensory Environments are still somewhat of an emerging trend in the United States. The theory originated in the late 1960s with two American psychologists, Cleland and Clark. By the mid-70s, researchers in the Netherlands had further developed the concept working with individuals with severe disabilities. Today, many MSEs exist throughout Europe as an enrichment tool for education, and a leisure activity for children with developmental disabilities. Fewer facilities are available in the United States, and are typically used for elderly within assisted living and skilled nursing facilities. MSEs can be developed just about anywhere; the key is to have a space that can be free of outside stimulation.

5 Why should someone use an MSE?

Multi-Sensory Environments stimulate all the senses, tapping into pleasant memories or creating positive new experiences. It is a safe and secure environment, allowing the user to explore their senses. Research studies have shown improvements in a wide range of behaviors and abilities associated with dementia in the elderly through the use of MSE. Functional and performance improvements were noted, along with a decrease in agitation, aggression, and depression. Among many outcomes, MSEs are a non-pharmaceutical intervention that can help change behavior, increase focus and attention, and add to feelings of positive self-esteem and well-being.



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