

Northampton VA Medical Center Presents: Sensory Approaches to Treatment

Northampton, MA
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This training was designed to help multidisciplinary staff of the Veterans' Hospital understand the value of using sensory approaches to facilitate comfort, self-control and function in patients ranging from returning veterans to those in the geriatric unit. Mental health problems included acute illness, PTSD, Traumatic Brain Injury, substance abuse and chronic mental illness.

Sensory approaches are unique in that they begin by facilitating self-awareness, which is a key to being able to move on to self-regulation and self-care. This training focused on ways to promote awareness of sensory responses and identify helpful as well as aversive sensory input. The critical need for sensory sensitive environments was emphasized and ideas were provided to develop supportive environments, sensory rooms, and comfort spaces.

A key objective of the training was to help staff understand that sensory based treatment is not a new approach but rather one that complements and enhances ongoing treatment components such as "Step by Step Coping Strategies," Safety Tool Boxes, DBT, Suicide and Safety Plans, Risk Assessment, and the outpatient "Come to Your Senses" program. In fact, sensory treatment strategies help achieve goals prioritized in the VA *Clinical Guidelines for the Management of Post Traumatic Stress*:

- Establish personal safety
- Maintain comfort
- Restore restful sleep
- Re-engage in self-care and daily routines and rituals
- Reduce tension and anxiety and manage stress
- Help family and caregivers learn ways to provide support



Sensory approaches are becoming "state of the art" according to experts in trauma psychology such as Dr. Richard Mollica, Dr. Robert Macy, and Dr. James Prescott. The VA Clinical Guidelines endorse sensory based approaches including EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), massage, acupuncture/acupressure, and yoga. Returning veterans deserve nothing less than the best treatments we can offer.

In the VA setting a specific challenge for this sensory based, self-care oriented treatment approach is the overcoming what Dr. Kilpatrick from the Pentagon calls "combating the warrior ethos" which causes veterans to

cover up symptoms and view seeking help a sign of weakness. A critical component to successful treatment is to help veterans become comfortable with self-nurturing strategies and the real need to become invested in what Dr. Jonathan Shay sees as the essential first steps a veteran needs to take: safety, sobriety, and self care.

The training utilized clinical stories as well as experiential application labs in order for participants to understand and become comfortable with sensory modalities. Participants learned that they use sensory strategies every day and they discussed ways these same strategies could be brought into the clinical setting. Components of sensory approaches to treatment were evaluated including crisis intervention plans, identification of useful sensory strategies, the employment of strong sensory input for calming, availability of baskets and carts with sensory equipment, effective use of sensory rooms and sensory sensitive environments and the need to carry over useful strategies into the discharge setting.

A special thanks goes to occupational therapist Diane Wheeler. She has been introducing the use of sensory strategies for several years and educating staff about the safe and effective use of sensory modalities. Her hard work and enthusiasm greatly contributed to the success of the conference.



For more information on importance and applicability of the use of sensory approaches in the [VA system follow this link.](#)