

Sensory Approaches to Treatment



Sensory treatment approaches offer a person-centered, strength oriented, skill building model of care. Sensory strategies initially focus on an essential underlying building block of self-awareness and self-acceptance. They then help a person move from self-awareness to self-regulation and on to self-care and eventually to self-healing. This approach complements other components of treatment including medical care and psychosocial interventions. It can enhance your culture of care and improve therapeutic prevention and intervention strategies as people become invested in their own physical and mental health.

Treatment strategies include individual treatment, group treatment and the development of sensory sensitive environments including sensory rooms and comfort spaces. Treatment can also include individualized sensory diets to foster comfort as well as function. Sensory input can be used effectively with people with cognitive difficulties or language barriers. Coping skills and strategies can be carried over to the home environment; family members and care providers become partners in recovery as they learn ways to support their loved ones in times of crisis or discomfort.

Sensory approaches add tools and strategies that support Trauma Informed Care and Restraint and Seclusion Reduction Initiatives. The atypical sensory experiences resulting from trauma cause abnormal sensory responses that cannot be addressed through traditional psychosocial models of treatment alone. Researchers and leaders in treatment for trauma including Beth Caldwell, Emily Holmes, Kevin Huckshorn, Janice LeBell, Robert Macy, Richard Mollica, and Stephen Porges are affirming the necessity of body oriented therapies (see references). Sensory approaches are not only supported by regulatory agencies such as JCAHO but these agencies look for the competent use of sensory modalities and sensory rooms by staff from all disciplines. JCAHO will be looking for ways that treatment will be integrated into discharge plans and community re-entry.

The use of sensory input is a critical component of healthy responses to life stressors that are easy to take for granted. Healthy people use sensory strategies as a matter of course. For example when people are stressed they seek the comfort of a loved one or pet, they curl-up in a blanket or seek a quiet space, they jog or work out at the gym, or they clean the garage or do physically demanding work. These are perfectly natural and subconscious ways to combat

stress and they are rich in helpful sensory input. Hospitalized patients often lack the opportunity and insight needed to engage in these types of activities without support.

Sensory approaches require multi-discipline cooperation; all hospital professionals have an important role. This person centered model empowers staff members to help in a positive, meaningful, and hopefully sustainable way.

“Take control and you help for a day, teach control and you help for a lifetime.”

Karen Moore

For example, if a patient is starting to lose control and staff steps in and the person ends up in restraint it may keep the person safe for that moment in time. This will not however keep the person safe when he or she returns home. My mantra is this, “Take control and you help for a day, teach control and you help for a lifetime.” If the patient was educated in self-regulation techniques, the staff person could have asked what “tools” would help. The patient might know to ask for a weighted blanket or to go to the sensory room to sit in a beanbag chair and listen to music. Educated staff members will know how to best support patients in their use of these sensory strategies.

Education of staff members is essential to the efficacy of this treatment approach. As staff members receive information on the senses and the way these treatment strategies work they become comfortable and confident in the use of these strategies. Investment in training is cost effective for many reasons including decreasing the incidents of restraint and injury as well as helping to avoid long hospital stays and re-hospitalizations. The most important benefit however is the empowerment of the patient or student to stay in good emotional control despite stressful circumstances or symptoms of mental illness, ADHD or PTSD and to avoid of the humiliation associated with drastic measures such as restraint.

Sensory approaches to treatment can be rewarding and energizing to staff motivated to improve patient care. Investment in this treatment approach will help to bring about the culture change necessary to provide the most up to date and effective treatment possible.

Karen Moore OTR/L

Follow this link for an extensive list of references that support the use of sensory modalities and sensory approaches to treatment.