Sensory Boxes & Other Ideas to Stimulate the Senses

Everybody experiences the world through the senses.

Sensory function refers to the ability to process information from the outside world through the five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. Sensory preferences emerge according to experiences of one’s own life time, starting at birth.

The sensory functions of elders decline as they grow older and this can impact on their sense of wellbeing and diminish communication levels.

Related: Sensory Stimulation for Dementia Care

Multi-Sensory Stimulation

Multi-sensory stimulation is becoming increasingly popular in nursing homes based on the impressive results of numerous research studies into its effectiveness.

Sensory activities contribute to the emotional and physical health of people living with dementia. Sensory activities can be non-verbal; thereby crossing cultural boundaries.

Maintenance and enhancement of the sensory integration process in people living with dementia is essential to healthy living.

What is a Memory Box?

Rummage, Memory or Sensory boxes are containers filled with everyday objects to assist people living with dementia to interact, communicate and reminisce. These activities can also be a soothing form of distraction.

The boxes are created to cater for individual needs or for the general use of residents. The aim is to offer failure free, gentle stimulation of sight, sound, taste, smell, touch and movement in a controlled environment.

Benefits of Sensory Stimulation

Among other things it is said to:

- Improve behaviour and mood
- Promote alertness
- Increase brain function
- Improve communication
Facilitation Multisensory Stimulation Activities

Many care homes have a multisensory or Snoezelen room that is not used to its full potential. Sometimes the room is not appealing enough to residents and sometimes staff do not know how to use them effectively.

The recreation and therapeutic purposes of the sensory stimulation program must be considered at all times. Residents should be monitored by well trained staff versed in life enrichment tactics and strategies.

The Activity Coordinator will plan the Multisensory Program, purchase materials, advise and supervise staff as well as offer training for volunteers to assist with the program.

Stimulus overload

Be aware that loud music, flickering lights, shadows and altercations may confuse people living with dementia.

Examples of Multisensory Activities

Multisensory activities are activities that combine two or more senses. In fact most sensory stimulation activities involve two or more of the senses such as:

- Drawing and listening to classic music
- Hand-massage and conversation
- Relaxing on a beanbag while watching colorful landscapes on a TV screen
- Having nails groomed in a garden setting

Related: Sensory Stimulation with Wind Chimes
Rummage and Sensory Box Ideas

The aim of sensory boxes is to offer the opportunity to stimulate as many senses as possible. This activity is also an opportunity to relax, to contemplate, to reflect, to chat and reminisce.

Sometimes staff will have to demonstrate (depending on age or stage of illness) the activity to engage the person; the emphasis is on enjoyment and participation.

Sensory box activities should be thoroughly supervised.

Here are some ideas for sensory boxes:

**Balls box** – A large plastic box or a small suitcase of balls in different textures; rubber, plastic, fabric, squishy, baby (with bell inside), goop balls, porcupine balls, massage balls, glow in the dark balls. Any type of exercise ball or tactile ball is suitable. The quantity of balls depends on the size of the box you have.

**Cereal Box** – A large container (46 x 23 cm or 18 x 9 inches) half-filled with uncooked oats or rice bubbles (Any cereal on sale). Offer spoons, cups and other utensils for exploration.

**Kinetic Sand** - This sand can be shaped and stretched without separating. Place sand on a large cooking tray and offer safety utensils for exploration. Consult with your management before purchasing.

**Seeds** - Gather or buy large seeds such as pine cones, waratahs, acorns, jacaranda, or whatever
seeds you have on hand e.g. avocado seeds, coconut, peach pit. NOTE: Be mindful of safety risks; insert small seeds into zip-lock plastic bags to avoid choking. Seeds can provide a variety of different textures, shapes and sizes to explore.

**Food** – Place a few boiled eggs or peeled bananas on a plate along with plastic cutlery. Demonstrate cutting the food and encourage residents to cut and taste it.

### Creating Multisensory Spaces

The addition of multisensory spaces to your facility may inspire residents to explore, interact or have somewhere where they can ‘just be’. Here are a few ideas:

**Office** – Create a working office in a corner of your facility for people who insist they have to ‘go to work’. Use an office desk, computer, files, pens and highlighters, a hole punch, in-out trays etc.

**Virtual Forest** – There are many things you can do to bring nature inside your facility. Use the bark of trees; stringybark (used in aboriginal paintings), birch, sycamore. You can use twigs, moss planted in pots, small tree branches and grasses, palm leaves, banana leaves, bird of paradise leaves, and ferns.

**Rummage dresser** – Set up a three or four drawer dresser in a corner of your facility and fill it with everyday items such as doilies, napkins, beanies, colored socks, scarves, baby clothes, tea towels, and other items. Some people may enjoy to sort and organize them.

**Outdoor garden shed** – Raised garden beds, an old plastic wheelbarrow, potting mixture, garden tools, and buckets.

**Old car** – Buy an old car that is still in reasonable condition (perhaps it could be donated if you spread the word around) and place it in the backyard of your facility, under a carport or driveway. Residents may feel compelled to ‘wash’ it, ‘fix’ it, or just sit in it.

This is just a start! There are many more stimulating areas worth trying: familiar foods, texture-rich materials, reading, massage, painting, outings, and music.

Connecting with the senses is a valuable way to communicate with people living with dementia.

Related: [Snoezelen Rooms & Sensory Environments for Dementia Care](https://www.goldencarers.com)

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**We'd love to hear your feedback. What has worked for you?**