

Dementia and Sensory Changes and Support

Diana Sturdevant Ph.D., GCNS-BC, APRN, NEA-BC
Research, Assistant Professor
Program Director, Nursing Home Quality Improvement Projects
Fran and Earl Ziegler College of Nursing
The University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center
1100 N. Stonewall | Oklahoma City, OK 73117
405-271-1491, Ext. 49201 | diana-sturdevant@ouhsc.edu



Introduction

- People living with dementia (PLWD) experience changes in how they experience and understand the world around them
- Sensory changes can result in confusion, agitation, and fear
- Critical that we figure out causes for distress and what helps



Sensory Changes in Dementia

- Vision
- Hearing
- Touch
- Taste
- Smell

Vision Changes

- Limits vision
- Dementia affects the part of the brain responsible for managing visual input
 - Misperception
 - Misidentification
- Vary among individuals
 - Inability to recognize color differences
 - Inability to describe what they see
 - Inability to detect movement
 - Mistake TV images for real life
 - Grow restless or agitated due to visual overstimulation



Support Strategies

- Keep the physical environment as consistent as possible
- Make changes gradually
- Pay attention to signs that indicate a person is experiencing visual changes
- Understand that visual hallucinations are a part of dementia for some people
- Adequate lighting, reduce glare

Hearing Changes

- Identifying what a sound is
- Distinguishing one sound from another
- Interpreting information they hear
- Distinguishing between multiple sounds or conversations
- Being startled or frightened by loud or sudden noises
- Pay close attention to ear hygiene

While hearing loss becomes increasingly common with age, PLWD may experience additional difficulties with hearing and interpreting sounds. Even if their hearing is fine, they may have trouble:

Identifying what a sound is; picking out one sound from another; interpreting the information they hear so they cannot understand what is being said, or it takes longer to process it;

As a result, it can be difficult for them to process and understand what they are hearing and communicate their response. This can lead to anxiety, frustration, confusion and distress, and to the person becoming withdrawn and less willing to interact with others.

Support Strategies

- Reduce noise as much as possible
- Turn off the TV, radio or background music when trying to talk with them
- Face the person and make eye contact
- Speak slowly and clearly, use simple words
- Give them time to process what you have said and give their answer
- Use pictures
- Write things down

Changes with Touch

- Absence of human touch
- Hypersensitivity to touch—water, textures, clothing
- Loss of sensation
 - Hot—Cold
 - Painful stimuli
- In late-stage dementia, increased sensitivity around mouth, hands, feet, and genitals

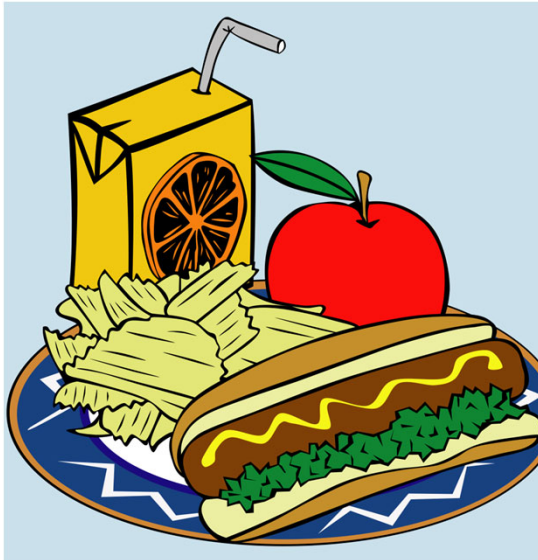
Touch serves as a universal language to elicit positive behaviors and promote feelings of safety and well-being. An absence of human touch can cause negative physical and emotional effects on PLWD. Hypersensitivity to touch—most commonly hear PLWD talk about this in relation to bathing—shower spray feeling like being stuck with icicles or ice pick. Textures are important—some people have strong aversions to certain kinds of materials—tight or restrictive clothing. Some times reactions can seem very exaggerated—mom and blood pressure cuff
Loss of sensation to hot or cold, also may not be as sensitive to pain or could be hypersensitive—very individualized

Support Strategies

- Explore various methods for bathing
- Seek information about personal preferences
- Monitor for comfort/acceptance
- Exercise caution with hot/cold
- Observe for indications of pain
- Use hand-over-hand technique for meals/oral hygiene

Changes in Taste and Smell

- Sensitivity to taste declines
- Changes in food taste and how experience flavor
- Can cause sudden changes in eating habits
- May crave foods that are rich and dense with flavor or sugar
- Can cause bad taste in mouth
- Poor oral hygiene contributes to decrease appetite



Taste buds diminish as dementia progresses, resulting in declines in taste sensitivity. A person with dementia may develop changes in how they experience flavor. They may start to enjoy flavors that they never liked before or dislike foods they always liked. Taste buds are connected to the nerves in the brain, and when these nerves are affected it can cause a bad taste in the mouth. The sense of smell is closely linked with memory, possibly more so than any of our other senses, and declining smell sensitivity can foreshadow dementia.

Dementia can impair the areas of the brain that enable the sense of smell and the ability of the individual to process smells. When this occurs, similar to changes in taste, often causes unhealthy weight loss and malnutrition



Support Strategies

- Be flexible about food preferences and offer favorites
- Make food look and smell appealing.
- Try different spices/seasonings when possible
- Maintain good oral hygiene

Be flexible about food preferences and offer favs

Make food look and smell appealing

Try adding mild spices/herbs, onion, garlic, pepper, chili, add pickles, relish or mustard....

If they have a sweet tooth try offering naturally sweet foods/sauces, apple sauce....

Environment

- Friendly—Familiar—Functional—Forgiving
- Space (personal, public)
 - Designated areas—quiet/calm
- Social (people, activity, role, expectation)
- Access to outside spaces
 - Fresh air—Sunlight
- Use of Colors
 - Blue—Green—Red—Yellow—Pink

In addition to exploring sensory changes and ways to address those changes—we need to consider the environment as a whole. An environment more supportive of PLWD should be friendly--familiar—functional—and forgiving. Need to have spaces both personal and public—should also have a supportive social environment.

Colors can have a large impact on

Using blue in a physical environment can help to reduce blood pressure...blue also tends to increase the size of a room

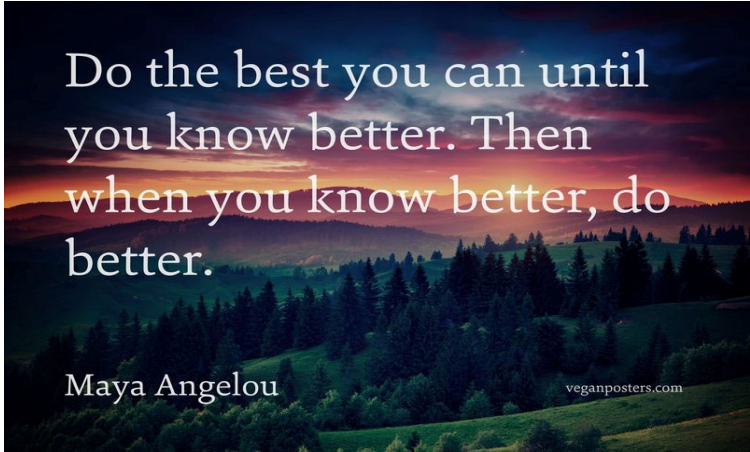
Green is a restful and life-affirming color that can increase visual attention and contrast well with other colors.

Red is a stimulating and attention-grabbing color that can enhance appetite and mood but should be used sparingly

Yellow is a cheerful and warm color that can brighten up spaces and evoke positive emotions

Pink is an uplifting and soothing color that can decrease agitation and anxiety

Important Reminder:
Care should be personalized
to the individual



Do the best you can until
you know better. Then
when you know better, do
better.

Maya Angelou

veganposters.com



FRAN AND EARL ZIEGLER

COLLEGE OF NURSING

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

Thank You!

Diana Sturdevant diana-sturdevant@ouhsc.edu

Questions?

