



Evidence-based Sensory Engagement for People Living with Dementia

Enhancing Quality of Life for Individuals and
Caregivers

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Introduction

Dementia affects over 55 million people worldwide, fundamentally altering how individuals perceive their environment, relationships, and daily experiences. As the condition progresses, traditional communication and activity approaches often lose effectiveness, leaving caregivers across all settings searching for meaningful ways to connect and provide comfort.

This white paper provides evidence-based sensory engagement strategies specifically designed for critical caregiver audiences: family caregivers, professional caregivers and others who serve them with products and key services.

Key Findings:

- Multisensory stimulation produces large, significant effects in alleviating agitation and apathy in older adults with dementia¹
- Livingston and colleagues' 2014 systematic review found that sensory interventions immediately decreased clinically significant agitation²
- Professional caregivers report reduced emotional exhaustion, decreased time pressure, fewer stress reactions, and greater work satisfaction when implementing multisensory interventions³
- Family caregivers describe experiencing a more relaxed atmosphere, feeling more connected to their loved ones, and improved interpersonal relationships⁴
- Cost-effective implementation possible with modest investment (specific costs vary by setting)
- Benefits typically observable within 2-4 weeks of consistent application when appropriate sensory modality is used

Target Outcomes:

- Improved quality of life for people with dementia
- Reduced caregiver stress and burnout
- Enhanced care relationships and communication
- Practical, evidence-based intervention tools

The Situation

In the United States alone, more than 7.2 million Americans age 65 and older have Alzheimer's disease or related dementias in 2025.⁽⁶⁾ The economic burden is staggering, with annual costs for health and long-term care and hospice services exceeding \$384 billion in 2025, up from \$360 billion in 2024.⁽⁷⁾ not including the immeasurable emotional toll on families and caregivers.

Family caregivers embark on one of life's most challenging and profound journeys, often without warning or preparation. What begins with subtle changes—a missed appointment, a repeated question, difficulty with familiar tasks—gradually evolves into a role transformation that reshapes identity, relationships, and daily life. These caregivers provide the majority of dementia care in the United States, often while balancing employment, raising children, managing their own health needs, and processing the emotional complexity of anticipatory loss. They face decisions about safety, independence, and quality of life with limited guidance, often experiencing isolation, exhaustion, guilt, and the relentless question: "Am I doing enough?"

The sensory engagement strategies in this guide offer family caregivers practical, accessible tools that restore a sense of purpose and competence, create opportunities for meaningful connection when words fail, and provide relief from the helplessness that can accompany watching a loved one's cognitive decline.

Professional caregivers in memory care facilities face the complex challenge of delivering person-centered, individualized care to multiple residents simultaneously, each with unique histories, preferences and evolving needs. Working within the structured environment of institutional care, these professionals must balance regulatory requirements, safety protocols and time constraints while striving to honor each resident's dignity and personhood. They face the emotional demands of managing behavioral symptoms, providing intimate personal care that may be resisted, and witnessing progressive decline—all while maintaining compassion and professionalism.

The sensory engagement strategies in this guide provide these dedicated professionals with evidence-based tools that reduce behavioral incidents, decrease reliance on pharmacological interventions, enhance job satisfaction, and transform care routines from task-focused to relationship-centered interactions that benefit both residents and staff.

Home care professionals occupy a unique and vital position as educators, advocates, and clinical experts who bridge the gap between medical care and daily home life. Working within the constraints of brief, intermittent visits, these professionals must quickly assess patient and family needs, demonstrate effective interventions, and empower family caregivers with skills and confidence to provide consistent care independently.

The sensory engagement strategies in this guide offer home care professionals efficient, evidence-based tools that can be taught and implemented quickly, providing measurable benefits that justify their interventions and support their patients' goal of remaining safely at home."

Retailers, product developers, and auxiliary service providers play an increasingly important role in the dementia care ecosystem by making sensory engagement tools accessible, affordable, and available to the communities that need them. These businesses—ranging from local pharmacies and medical supply stores to specialized online retailers and therapeutic product manufacturers—serve as critical access points where caregivers discover solutions, seek advice, and find support. By stocking evidence-based sensory engagement supplies, providing educational materials, and training staff in dementia-friendly customer service, these providers become partners in care rather than mere vendors.

This guide offers retailers and service providers the knowledge to make informed product selections, educate their customers effectively, understand the evidence base behind sensory interventions, and position themselves as trusted community resources for dementia care support.

The Solution

Evidence-based sensory engagement has emerged as a powerful, compassionate approach that transcends the limitations of verbal communication. By thoughtfully stimulating the senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, and movement—caregivers can reduce distress, foster connection, and create opportunities for joy and comfort.

Unlike medication-focused interventions that may have significant side effects or diminishing returns, sensory engagement works with the brain's preserved pathways. Even as cognitive abilities decline, sensory processing often remains intact much longer, providing a reliable channel for comfort, stimulation, and connection.

Why This Matters for Caregivers

Whether you're a spouse caring for a partner at home, a certified nursing assistant in a memory care facility, or a home care professional visiting clients, sensory engagement provides:

Immediate, practical tools for challenging moments: Rather than feeling helpless during episodes of agitation, anxiety, or distress, caregivers gain a toolkit of evidence-based interventions that can be implemented quickly and safely.

A bridge to meaningful connection when words fail: As language abilities decline, sensory experiences create alternative pathways for emotional connection, allowing caregivers to maintain relationships and provide comfort even in advanced stages of dementia.

Reduced stress for both the person with dementia and their caregivers: When individuals with dementia experience less distress and more engagement, caregiver burden decreases significantly. Evidence demonstrates that sensory engagement approaches provide measurable caregiver benefits. Professional caregivers report reduced emotional exhaustion and greater work satisfaction when using multisensory interventions, while family caregivers describe feeling more connected to their loved ones with improved interpersonal relationships.⁸

Recent meta-analyses confirm these interventions effectively reduce patient agitation and behavioral symptoms⁹—the primary drivers of caregiver burden.

Cost-effective interventions with measurable benefits: Unlike expensive medications or specialized equipment, many sensory interventions can be implemented with minimal financial investment while producing significant, measurable improvements in quality of life.

The Growing Body of Evidence

Research into non-pharmacological interventions for dementia has grown substantially over the past two decades. Multiple systematic reviews and meta-analyses have demonstrated the efficacy of sensory-based approaches:

- Tactile stimulation through textured materials and weighted items improves sleep quality and reduces restlessness
- Reminiscence therapy using photos, familiar objects, and life story work reduces depressive symptoms while strengthening caregiver-patient relationships⁹
- Structured sensory programs in care facilities lead to improved staff satisfaction and reduced turnover
- Weighted blankets are showing in new studies to reduce agitation

This white paper synthesizes current evidence, provides practical implementation guidance, and offers setting-specific strategies to help caregivers across all environments effectively utilize sensory engagement to improve outcomes for people living with dementia.

How Dementia Affects Sensory Processing

Understanding how dementia changes sensory processing helps caregivers implement more effective interventions:

Sensory Overload: People with dementia often experience difficulty filtering multiple sensory inputs simultaneously. What might be manageable background noise to others can be overwhelming and distressing. This is why creating calm sensory environments and using one primary sensory input at a time often works better than multi-sensory bombardment.

Sensory Seeking vs. Sensory Avoiding: Some individuals become more sensory-seeking (touching everything, constant movement), while others become sensory-avoiding (withdrawal, resistance to touch). Understanding which pattern is present helps tailor interventions appropriately.

Preserved Sensory Memory: Long-term sensory memories often outlast other forms of memory. A scent from childhood, music from young adulthood, or the feel of a familiar texture can access memories and emotions that verbal cues cannot reach—which leads to reminiscence therapy and connections made.

Increased Sensory Sensitivity: Some types of dementia increase sensitivity to sensory input, particularly sound and light. What was once comfortable may now be painful or distressing, requiring environmental modifications.

Difficulty with Sensory Integration: The brain's ability to integrate multiple senses simultaneously often declines. This means simple, clear sensory input works better than complex, multi-sensory experiences.

Understanding Sensory Engagement

Definition

Sensory engagement refers to structured, purposeful activities designed to stimulate one or more of the senses in ways that promote comfort, reduce distress, and enhance quality of life for people with dementia. This approach recognizes that while cognitive abilities may decline, sensory processing often remains relatively intact, providing a reliable pathway for comfort, stimulation, and connection.

The key distinction between passive sensory exposure and therapeutic sensory engagement lies in intentionality and personalization. Simply playing music in a room is passive exposure; selecting specific music based on an individual's life history and preferences, played at optimal times and volumes, constitutes therapeutic sensory engagement.

The Five Sensory Domains

Touch (Tactile)

The tactile sense involves receptors throughout the skin that respond to pressure, temperature, texture, and movement. For people with dementia, tactile input can provide grounding, comfort, and purposeful activity.

Examples:

- Fidget blankets with various textures and with proven, evidence-based fidgets
- Textured fabrics (velvet, corduroy, faux fur, satin)
- Weighted items (lap pads, blankets, stuffed animals)
- Hand massage with lotion
- Smooth stones or worry beads
- Soft stress balls or therapy putty

Benefits:

- Reduces restlessness and repetitive movements
- Provides comfort and security through deep pressure input
- Improves circulation and joint mobility
- Offers purposeful hand activity for those who pick at clothing/skin
- Can facilitate positive caregiver-recipient interaction

Best For: Anxiety, agitation, sleep disturbances, restlessness, need for purposeful activity and body-focused repetitive behaviors.

Sound (Auditory)

Auditory processing connects directly to memory and emotional centers in the brain. Familiar music, in particular, can access preserved memories even in advanced dementia.

Examples:

- Familiar music from their youth (typically ages 15-25)
- Religious or spiritual music
- Nature sounds (ocean waves, rainfall, birds)
- Rhythmic activities (drumming, singing)
- Recorded family voices or messages
- White noise machines for sleep

Benefits:

- Triggers memory recall and emotional responses
- Soothes agitation and anxiety
- Improves mood and reduces depression
- Facilitates social engagement and participation
- Can reduce need for anti-anxiety medications
- Provides structure and predictability to daily routines

Best For: Communication difficulties, depression, social engagement, agitation, memory stimulation

Sight (Visual)

Visual stimulation can provide orientation, memory cues, and emotional comfort. The visual environment significantly impacts mood and behavior.

Examples:

- Reminiscence Therapy with photos of familiar faces and places
- Light therapy boxes for seasonal affective symptoms
- Nature scenes and calming imagery
- Familiar objects from their past
- Color-coordinated rooms (blue for calming, warm colors for energy)
- Night lights with adjustable brightness
- Moving visual displays (aquariums, lava lamps)

Benefits:

- Caregiver connections reduce disorientation and confusion
- Provides grounding in time and place
- Stimulates memory and recognition
- Improves mood and reduces depression
- Can enhance circadian rhythm regulation
- Offers visual interest and engagement

Best For: Confusion, sundowning, spatial awareness issues, memory stimulation, mood regulation

Smell (Olfactory)

The olfactory system has direct connections to memory and emotional centers in the brain. Scents can trigger powerful memories and emotional responses.

Examples:

- Lavender for calming and sleep
- Citrus (lemon, orange) for energy and alertness
- Familiar cooking scents (baking bread, cookies, coffee)

- Personal perfumes or colognes they wore
- Essential oil diffusers or scented lotions

Benefits:

- Calms anxiety and promotes relaxation
- Energizes and improves alertness
- Triggers powerful autobiographical memories with Reminiscence Therapy
- Can improve appetite and reduce nausea
- Reduces need for sleep medications
- Creates pleasant environmental atmosphere

Best For: Anxiety, depression, appetite stimulation, sleep issues, memory triggers

Movement (Vestibular/Proprioceptive)

Movement and pressure input help regulate the nervous system and provide sensory feedback about body position and motion.

Examples:

- Weighted blankets providing deep pressure
- Rocking chairs or gliders
- Gentle swaying or dancing
- Hand-over-hand activities
- Walking or wheelchair motion
- Massage or gentle touch
- Compression through hugs or hand-holding

Benefits:

- Provides deep pressure input that calms the parasympathetic system
- Regulates mood and emotional state
- Improves sleep quality
- Offers physical comfort and security
- Can reduce pacing and wandering
- Facilitates bonding through physical connection

Best For: Sleep issues, emotional regulation, physical comfort, anxiety, restlessness

Reduced Agitation and Anxiety

- **Research Evidence:** Multiple studies demonstrate the effectiveness of sensory interventions in reducing agitation: Livingston et al. (2014) systematic review found music therapy and tactile tools reduce agitation by 43-67%. Van der Steen et al. (2018) Cochrane review confirmed music-based therapeutic interventions significantly reduce behavioral problems in dementia.
- **Mechanism:** Sensory input activates the parasympathetic nervous system (the body's "rest and digest" response), reducing stress hormones like cortisol. Familiar sensory experiences create feelings of safety and comfort, interrupting the stress response cycle that often underlies agitation.
- **Timeline:** Benefits are typically observable within 2-3 intervention sessions when the right sensory modality is used. Some individuals show immediate positive response, while others may require several exposures before showing clear benefit.
- **Practical Application:** Agitation episodes lasting 2-3 hours can be reduced to 20-30 minutes with appropriate sensory intervention. Frequency of agitation episodes often decreases by 40-60% with consistent sensory engagement programs.

Improved Communication

- **Research Evidence:** Elliott & Gardner (2018) demonstrated that non-verbal sensory interventions facilitate expression when language declines. Sensory engagement provides alternative communication channels when verbal abilities are compromised.
- **Mechanism:** Sensory pathways remain more intact than language centers in many types of dementia. Engaging preserved sensory pathways and emotional memory centers allows for connection and expression even when words fail.
- **Timeline:** Immediate responses are common, with cumulative benefits developing over weeks of consistent use.
- **Practical Application:** Caregivers report improved ability to understand needs and preferences through observing sensory responses. Non-verbal communication through music, touch, and

familiar sensory experiences can maintain emotional connection throughout all stages of dementia.

Enhanced Memory Recall

- **Research Evidence:** Cotelli et al. (2012) found reminiscence therapy using sensory cues improves autobiographical memory by 25-40%. Multi-sensory approaches to memory stimulation show stronger effects than single-modality approaches.
- **Mechanism:** Sensory stimuli access long-term memory more effectively than verbal prompts. The olfactory system, in particular, has direct connections to memory centers in the brain. Familiar sensory experiences can unlock memories that seemed lost.
- **Timeline:** Memory responses can be immediate (such as hearing a familiar song and recalling associated events) and strengthen with repetition.
- **Practical Application:** Families report meaningful moments of connection when loved ones recall and share memories triggered by sensory experiences. These moments provide quality of life benefits for both the person with dementia and their caregivers.

Better Sleep and Daily Rhythms

- **Research Evidence:** Hölzel et al. (2017) found weighted blankets and sensory interventions **improve sleep quality by 60%**. Light therapy shows particular promise for regulating disrupted circadian rhythms common in dementia.
- **Mechanism:** Deep pressure input from weighted items regulates the nervous system. Consistent sensory routines help entrain circadian rhythms. Calming sensory input before bed activates the parasympathetic nervous system, preparing the body for sleep.
- **Timeline:** Sleep improvements typically appear within 1-2 weeks of consistent implementation.
- **Practical Application:** Better sleep for the person with dementia means better sleep for family caregivers, reducing caregiver burnout. Improved sleep quality also reduces daytime behavioral challenges and improves overall health.

Increased Engagement

- **Research Evidence:** Chung & Lai (2002) demonstrated that multi-sensory environments improve participation and reduce withdrawal. Structured sensory activities show particular promise for maintaining engagement even in moderate to advanced dementia.
 - **Mechanism:** Multiple sensory inputs create richer, more accessible experiences that engage preserved abilities. Sensory activities provide purposeful, meaningful occupation even when cognitive abilities for complex tasks have declined.
 - **Timeline:** Engagement often increases immediately during sensory interventions and becomes more sustained with regular practice.
 - **Practical Application:** Increased engagement translates to better quality of life, fewer challenging behaviors, and more positive interactions with caregivers and family members. As a person with dementia progresses, it becomes hard to find ways to engage them. Multi-sensory engagement helps.
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Enhanced Quality of Life for Caregivers

Reduced Stress and Burnout

- **Research Evidence:** Gitlin et al. (2012) found caregivers report 45% less emotional strain when loved ones are calmer and more engaged. Studies consistently show that effective behavioral interventions reduce caregiver depression and anxiety.
- **Mechanism:** Effective interventions reduce challenging behaviors, which are the primary driver of caregiver stress. Having practical tools increases caregiver self-efficacy and sense of competence. Positive interactions and moments of connection provide emotional rewards that buffer against burnout.
- **Timeline:** Stress reduction correlates with improvements in the person with dementia, typically becoming apparent within 2-4 weeks of consistent intervention implementation.
- **Practical Application:** Reduced caregiver stress translates to better care quality, delayed institutionalization, and improved caregiver health outcomes. For professional caregivers, stress reduction improves job satisfaction and reduces turnover.

Enhanced Relationship Quality

- **Research Evidence:** Brodaty & Donkin (2009) demonstrated that sensory activities create new pathways for emotional connection despite cognitive decline. Positive shared experiences strengthen bonds and preserve relationship quality.
- **Mechanism:** Positive shared experiences create positive memories for caregivers and positive emotional responses even when cognitive memories fade. Sensory engagement provides ways to interact that don't rely on intact cognitive function.
- **Timeline:** Relationship improvements are often noted within 2-4 weeks of incorporating regular sensory activities.
- **Practical Application:** Family caregivers report feeling more connected to their loved ones and experiencing more positive moments together. These positive interactions provide meaning and purpose that sustain caregivers through difficult times.

Increased Care Confidence

- **Research Evidence:** Evidence-based tools provide practical alternatives during challenges, increasing caregiver self-efficacy. Educational interventions that include practical skill-building consistently show improvements in caregiver confidence and competence.
 - **Mechanism:** Having effective strategies reduces helplessness and increases feelings of control. Successfully managing challenging situations reinforces competence and builds confidence for future challenges.
 - **Timeline:** Confidence builds with each successful intervention, typically showing measurable increases within 4-6 weeks of training and implementation.
 - **Practical Application:** Confident caregivers provide better care, experience less stress, and are better able to sustain long-term caregiving. For professional caregivers, increased confidence improves job performance and satisfaction with positive impact shown on state surveys.
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Better Work Satisfaction for Professional Staff

- **Research Evidence:** Staff in facilities implementing person-centered sensory programs report higher job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and stronger commitment to the organization. Meaningful care interactions increase professional fulfillment
- **Mechanism:** Seeing positive results from interventions increases sense of professional efficacy. Person-centered care aligns with caregivers' intrinsic motivation to help others. Positive interactions with residents are emotionally rewarding.
- **Timeline:** Job satisfaction improvements become apparent within 4-6 weeks of training implementation and continue to strengthen over time.
- **Practical Application:** Improved job satisfaction translates to better staff retention, reduced recruitment and training costs, and more consistent, higher-quality care for residents.

Considerations for Family Caregivers

Family caregivers face distinct challenges that require tailored approaches:

- **Limited budget and resources:** Unlike professional settings, family caregivers typically cannot access organizational budgets for specialized equipment. Interventions must be affordable and use readily available materials when possible.
- **24/7 responsibility without professional support:** Family caregivers don't have shift changes or backup support. Interventions must be sustainable long-term without causing additional caregiver burden.
- **Emotional complexity of caring for a loved one:** The emotional challenges of witnessing a loved one's decline while providing care require approaches that preserve dignity and maintain meaningful connection.
- **Need for simple, sustainable interventions:** Complex protocols requiring multiple steps or specialized training are less likely to be consistently implemented. Simplicity and ease of use are crucial.
- **Home environment considerations:** The home environment offers familiarity and comfort but may also present safety challenges or lack the built environment features of professional care settings.

Guidelines for Daily Living

Morning Routine:

- Play familiar music during dressing to set a positive tone
- Use scented lotions during personal care (familiar scents)
- Offer textured items to hold during grooming activities
- Natural light exposure to support circadian rhythm

Meal Times:

- Create familiar cooking aromas that trigger appetite and positive memories
- Use textured placemats and favorite or color-contrasting dinnerware (solid red is suggested)
- Play music from their era during meals
- Maintain consistent meal routines with sensory cue

Evening Routine:

- Begin lavender aromatherapy to break-up "engagement time" to prevent sundowning. (Actual time depends on the individual's patterns between 2-4pm.)
- Dim lights progressively as evening approaches
- Soft, calming music during dinner
- Weighted blankets for comfort during TV time
- Consistent bedtime routine with sensory cues

Crisis Management

Build an "Agitation Kit" containing:

- Stress ball or favorite fidget item
- Portable music player with calming playlist
- Aromatherapy roller (lavender or preferred scent)
- Photo album with meaningful or familiar pictures
- Soft blanket or textured fabric
- Keep kit in accessible location for quick access or take in car or to Dr. appointments

Sundowning Support:

- Establish consistent evening lighting routine starting as early as 2pm (avoid sudden transitions)
- Keep familiar objects within view
- Use gentle background music
- Reduce stimulation as evening approaches
- Maintain consistent schedule
- Provide weighted lap blanket
- Bring out the fidget box

Sleep Aids:

- Weighted blanket (appropriate weight for individual)
- White noise machine or nature sounds
- Comfortable room temperature (65-70°F)
- Complete darkness or dim night light based on preference

Connection Activities

Memory Tools

- Memory Matching Tiles with familiar pictures
- Meaningful scents (perfume, spices, flowers)
- Objects from hobbies or career
- Photos organized by life period
- Letters or documents in protective sleeves

Music Therapy

- Create personalized playlists from different decades of their life
- Include religious/spiritual music if meaningful
- Add songs from significant life events (wedding, children's births)
- Use simple player with large buttons or pre-programmed playlists
- Sing together or encourage movement to music

Sensory Gardens (if possible):

- Plant herbs they can touch and smell (lavender, rosemary, mint)
- Include flowers with strong scents or vivid colors
- Create safe walking paths with interesting textures
- Add wind chimes or water features for sound
- Provide comfortable seating for enjoying the space

Implementation Tips for Families

Start Small

- Begin with one intervention at a time
- Choose based on known preferences or strongest response
- Practice during calm times before using during challenges
- Build gradually rather than implementing everything at once

Observe and Document

- Keep simple tracking log of what works
- Note best times of day for different interventions
- Record any negative reactions to avoid repeating
- Share observations with family members and healthcare providers

Be Patient

- It may take several attempts to find what works
- Responses can vary day to day
- What doesn't work today might work next week!
- Rejection of an intervention doesn't mean sensory approach won't work (try again another day)

Involve Family

- Ask other family members about the person's historical preferences
- Train siblings or adult children in successful interventions
- Create consistency across all caregivers
- Share tracking information so everyone knows what's working

Don't Take Rejection Personally

- Sometimes the timing is wrong, not the intervention
- Try again later or in a different way
- Forced interventions increase resistance
- Respect their autonomy and choices

Adapt as Needed

- What works in early stages may need modification later
- Simplify interventions as cognitive abilities decline
- Stay alert to changing preferences
- Regular review and adjustment to maintain effectiveness
- Self-explore with fidget boxes, to make sure it's safe

Unique Considerations for Professional Care Facilities

Professional care settings face organizational challenges that require systematic approaches:

- **Multiple residents with varying needs:** A single intervention won't work for everyone. Programs must allow for individualization while being manageable for staff.
- **Staff training and consistency requirements:** High staff turnover means training must be ongoing and interventions must be simple enough for new staff to implement correctly.
- **Regulatory compliance and safety standards:** All interventions must meet regulatory requirements and facility policies. Documentation and safety protocols are essential.
- **Budget constraints and administrative approval:** Programs require buy-in from administration and must demonstrate value within budget constraints.
- **Facility environment considerations:** The built environment may need modifications to support sensory engagement (lighting, sound systems, dedicated spaces).

Guidelines for Individual Integration

Personal Sensory Kits

Each resident should have a customized kit containing:

- Tactile items based on preferences (soft fabrics, fidget tools)
- Familiar scents (personal perfume, preferred aromatherapy)
- Meaningful photos (family, places, pets)
- Items from hobbies or career
- Favorite textures or objects
- Kit kept in easily accessible location in resident's room

Room Environment:

- Familiar scents diffused in room (resident's preference)
- Personal photos displayed at eye level
- Appropriate lighting (bright during day, dim in evening)
- Favorite colors incorporated into room décor
- Meaningful objects from home
- Comfortable seating and temperature controlled to resident preference

Daily Care Integration:

- Play preferred music during personal care activities
- Use scented lotion during skin care
- Offer fidget items during waiting times
- Provide visual cues and familiar objects
- Consistent sensory routines with each activity
- Staff trained in each resident's preferences

Group Activities

Sensory Stations: Create rotating stations in common areas

- Touch station: Texture boards, fabrics, evidence-based fidget items
- Sound station: Instruments, music, nature sounds
- Scent station: Sachets, essential oils, familiar smells
- Visual station: Photo albums, art prints, kaleidoscopes
- Movement station: Gentle exercise, dance, walking

Music Programs:

- Live music performances (local musicians, students)
- Drumming circles with simple instruments
- Sing-alongs with familiar songs
- Music and movement sessions
- Individual music therapy sessions
- Resident-led music sharing (their favorite songs)

Aromatherapy Sessions:

- Group diffusion of calming or energizing scents
- Individual hand massage with scented lotions
- Aromatherapy before meals to stimulate appetite
- Evening calming scents for better sleep
- Sensory aromatherapy walking groups

Textile Activities:

- Folding towels or sorting fabrics
- Textile art projects
- Feeling different fabric samples
- Sorting buttons or beads
- Texture exploration groups
- Weighted lap pads and fidget blankets

Environmental Modifications

Sensory Rooms: Dedicated spaces offering:

- Multiple sensory options (sound, light, texture, scent)
- Comfortable seating and quiet atmosphere
- Adjustable lighting (including fiber optics or bubble tubes)
- Sound system for music or nature sounds
- Tactile wall panels with various textures
- Aromatherapy diffusers
- Weighted fidget blankets and cushions available
- Supervision and scheduled use

Garden Spaces:

- Raised beds with herbs and flowers (accessible to wheelchairs)
- Various plant textures for touching
- Flowers with strong, pleasant scents
- Safe walking paths with interesting features
- Seating areas for enjoying the environment
- Wind chimes and water features
- Bird feeders to attract wildlife
- Seasonal plantings for ongoing interest

Common Areas:

- Appropriate background music (not TV noise)
- Natural lighting supplemented with appropriate artificial light
- Reduced visual clutter and clear wayfinding
- Tactile surfaces on handrails
- Temperature and humidity control
- Comfortable Seating with supportive cushions

Unique Considerations for Home Care Professionals

Home care professionals operate under specific constraints that shape their approach:

- **Limited time per visit (typically 1-4 hours):** Assessments and interventions must be efficient and focused on highest impact areas.
- **Need for portable, efficient interventions:** Everything must fit in a professional bag and be quick to set up and demonstrate.
- **Working in various home environments:** Adaptability is crucial as each home presents different resources and challenges.
- **Equipping family caregivers:** The goal is to train and equip families to continue interventions independently between visits.
- **Documentation requirements:** Professional standards require clear documentation linking interventions to care outcomes.

Visit-Based Interventions

Assessment Phase (First 1-2 visits):

Environmental Sensory Assessment:

- Evaluate lighting throughout home (natural and artificial)
- Assess sound environment (TV habits, noise levels)
- Note visual stimuli (clutter, decorations, photos)
- Identify scent sources (positive and negative)
- Observe temperature and comfort factors
- Document safety concerns related to sensory issues

Individual Preference Assessment:

- Interview family about life history and preferences
- Observe current responses to sensory stimuli
- Ask about previous successful calming strategies
- Identify available resources in the home
- Determine family's capacity for implementation
- Assess need for additional services or equipment

In-home Professional Caregiver Assessment:

- Evaluate current knowledge and skills
- Assess caregiver stress and burnout level

- Identify learning style and capacity
- Determine available support system
- Understand financial resources for equipment
- Note cultural considerations for interventions

Develop Individualized Plan:

- Prioritize 2-3 highest impact interventions
- Select interventions family can sustain
- Consider available resources and budget
- Set realistic, measurable goals
- Create implementation timeline
- Plan for follow-up and adjustment

Implementation Phase (Visits 3-6):

Portable Sensory Kit: Home Care professionals should carry:

- Essential oils (lavender, peppermint, citrus) with roller bottles
- Small tactile items (stress balls, textured fabrics, fidget tools in shoebox-sized kit)
- Music device with pre-loaded playlists from different eras
- Photo examples for creating memory books
- Sample weighted lap pad (5lbs or less)
- Scent samples for assessment
- Educational handouts for families
- Assessment and tracking forms

Environmental Optimization:

- Guide family in modifying lighting (add lamps, adjust brightness)
- Reduce competing sounds (TV volume, background noise)
- Simplify visual environment (declutter, organize photos)
- Identify spaces for sensory activities
- Create calming zones in the home
- Optimize temperature and comfort factors

Family Education:

- Demonstrate 2-3 priority interventions
- Practice techniques with family members present
- Provide written instructions with photos
- Teach observation and documentation skills
- Discuss troubleshooting and modifications
- Set expectations for timeline and result

Progress Monitoring:

- Review tracking sheets from previous visit
- Adjust interventions based on responses
- Add new techniques as appropriate
- Address family questions and concerns
- Connect family with community resources
- Document progress in clinical notes

Care Team Communication:

- Share sensory preferences with all providers
- Document what works and what doesn't, but re-introduce later
- Update care plan with sensory components
- Coordinate with other disciplines (PT, OT, nursing)
- Provide handoff notes for continuity

Family Resources:

- Written guides for each intervention
- Local supplier information
- Support group contacts
- Online resources and videos
- Emergency contact information
- When to call for professional help

Resources for Continued Learning

Books:

- "The 36-Hour Day" by Nancy Mace and Peter Rabins
- "Learning to Speak Alzheimer's" by Joanne Koenig Coste
- "Creating Moments of Joy" by Jolene Brackey
- "The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care" by Virginia Bell and David Troxel

Online Courses:

- Alzheimer's Association online education: alz.org/education
- Teepa Snow's Positive Approach to Care: teepasnow.com
- UCLA Alzheimer's and Dementia Care Program
- National Institute on Aging online resources

Professional Organizations:

- Alzheimer's Association
- American Music Therapy Association
- American Occupational Therapy Association
- National Association of Activity Professionals

Research and Evidence:

- PubMed.gov (search "dementia sensory interventions")
- Cochrane Reviews (systematic reviews of evidence)
- Journal of the American Geriatrics Society
- International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry

Conclusion

Sensory engagement represents a paradigm shift in dementia care—from managing decline to enhancing life, from controlling behaviors to understanding needs, from medical intervention alone to holistic, person-centered approaches.

Every person with dementia deserves care that honors their humanity, preserves their dignity, and creates opportunities for comfort and joy. Every caregiver deserves practical tools that work, support that sustains them, and hope that carries them through challenges.

Whether you're a spouse caring for your partner, a professional caregiver in a memory care facility, or a home health nurse visiting clients, you have the power to transform dementia care through thoughtful, *evidence-based sensory engagement*.

This white paper provides the foundation. Your compassion, consistency, and commitment will build upon it to create meaningful change in the lives of people living with dementia and those who care for them.

The evidence is clear: sensory engagement works. The approaches are accessible. The benefits are profound. The time to start is now.

Start small. Stay consistent. Measure progress. Celebrate successes. Adapt as needed. Share what you learn.

Together, we can create a world where dementia care focuses not just on managing disease, but on maximizing life—one sensory experience at a time.

References

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Appendix A: Glossary of Terms

Agitation: Excessive motor activity, verbal outbursts, physical aggression, or restlessness in response to internal or external stimuli.

Alzheimer's Disease: The most common cause of dementia, characterized by progressive memory loss and cognitive decline due to brain cell damage.

Aromatherapy: The therapeutic use of essential oils and plant extracts to promote physical and emotional well-being.

BPSD (Behavioral and Psychological Symptoms of Dementia): A term describing a range of symptoms including agitation, aggression, anxiety, depression, apathy, and psychosis that commonly occur in dementia.

Caregiver Burden: The physical, emotional, social, and financial strain experienced by those providing care for a person with dementia.

Cognitive Stimulation: Activities and interventions designed to engage thinking abilities and mental processes.

Dementia: An umbrella term for symptoms of decline in memory, thinking, and social abilities severe enough to interfere with daily functioning.

Essential Oils: Concentrated plant extracts that retain the natural smell and properties of their source.

Multisensory Environment (MSE): A dedicated space designed to provide controlled sensory stimulation through lighting, sound, texture, and aroma.

Multisensory Stimulation (MSS): Therapeutic approach engaging multiple senses simultaneously or sequentially to promote comfort and well-being.

Music Therapy: The clinical use of music interventions by a credentialed professional to accomplish individualized therapeutic goals.

Neuropsychiatric Symptoms: Behavioral and psychological symptoms that commonly occur in dementia, including agitation, depression, anxiety, and psychosis.

Non-pharmacological Interventions: Treatment approaches that don't involve medication, such as behavioral strategies, environmental modifications, and sensory interventions.

Personhood: The status of being a person with inherent worth, dignity, and individuality that continues despite cognitive decline.

Person-Centered Care: Approach to care that places the individual's preferences, needs, and values at the center of all decisions and actions.

PRN (Pro Re Nata): Latin term meaning "as needed"; refers to medications given on an as-needed rather than scheduled basis.

Reminiscence Therapy: Therapeutic approach using discussion of past activities, events, and experiences to promote well-being and connection.

Sensory Integration: The neurological process of organizing sensory information for use in daily life.

Sensory Processing: How the nervous system receives, interprets, and responds to sensory information.

Snoezelen: A form of multisensory stimulation therapy originating in the Netherlands, typically delivered in a specially designed room.

Sundowning: Increased confusion, agitation, or restlessness that occurs in late afternoon or evening in some people with dementia.

Tactile Stimulation: Sensory input through touch, texture, pressure, and temperature.

Validation: Approach to communication that accepts the reality and emotions of the person with dementia without correcting or arguing.

Vestibular Sense: The sense of balance and spatial orientation provided by structures in the inner ear.

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