

The rapid growth of an ageing population and the rising number of people affected by dementia, has brought on an urgent need for effective interventions in supporting dementia care, in particular in respect to one of the most important aspects in care home settings: **the provision of appropriate stimulation and activities** for people living with the condition. In this context it is increasingly questioned what the **potential impact is of design on the quality of life and wellbeing of people with dementia**, as well as for their carers, and care workers.



**Dr Anke Jakob** Faculty of Art, Design & Architecture, Kingston University London  
**Dr Lesley Collier** Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton

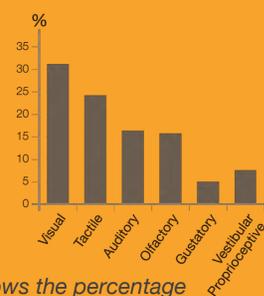
# How to make a Sensory Room for people living with dementia – developing design guidance for multisensory stimulation in dementia care

This recent interdisciplinary research explores new approaches to designing and creating environments that better suit the sensory needs of people living with dementia in care home settings, with a particular focus on the **design of multisensory spaces** - often referred to as Sensory Rooms or Multisensory Environments (MSEs).

## The Study

A survey was conducted with 16 care homes within London and South UK participating, to examine and record the current use of Sensory Rooms, their design and the opinions of staff using these facilities. Data were collected using ethnographic methods incorporating semi-structured interviews with staff and observations of existing facilities and sensory sessions from the point of view of the person with dementia.

The results suggest that existing MSEs are mostly of inadequate design and set up, and facilitation by staff is poor. They often do not feature an appropriate range of equipment and items, the idea of multi-sensory stimulation is neglected as equipment available is focused predominantly on the visual sense.



The graph shows the percentage of the provision of stimulation for each sense.

Some of the spaces were perceived as very technical and 'cold' in appearance, or too dark; others were too over-whelming and juvenile in design.



Examples of Sensory Rooms visited with MSE equipment provided by suppliers: bubble column, disco ball, projector with themed image-wheel, coloured optic-fibres, CD player/sound system, waterbed and furniture with liquid resistant vinyl covering.

**comfortable**  
**familiar**



**multi sensory**

Based on the findings from the study, design criteria were identified that need to be considered when designing a multisensory space to **improve experience and accessibility** for people with dementia.

A **guide book with design recommendations** for setting up multisensory facilities in care homes was developed and published online. The guide titled *How to make a Sensory Room for people living with dementia* aims to be a tool for health care practitioners, care home staff and carers enabling them to facilitate **sensory spaces that are suitable and appropriate for residents with dementia and their families.**

### Feeling comfortable and safe

The space you want to create should be an environment where residents feel comfortable, safe and secure. It should be an intimate, contained and quiet space with resistance or zero capacity for disturbance or distraction, neither visually nor through loud noise or other people walking in and out. Providing a soft, warm and cosy atmosphere is vital.

Using low-level sensory stimulation will activate the parasympathetic nervous system, inducing a state of calm. This will help the residents to relax and will reduce stress and anxiety, and subsequently enable them to better focus on activities offered.

#### Textiles, fabrics and other soft materials:

- Soft blankets:**
  - To be put on resident's lap or wrap themselves in.
  - To provide soft touch to furniture which has a hot-textile surface.
- Soft cushions and soft toys:**
  - For residents to touch and cuddle.
  - To make seating more comfortable.
- Plain textile curtains:**
  - To cover ceiling and walls (from top to bottom) giving the space a softer and warmer feel and look, and softening sound and noise.
  - To cover shelves/storage facilities for items and equipment not always in use (DVD/CD player, microwave, instruments, tactile objects).
  - To divide a larger room and create a smaller space for more intimate or 1:1 sessions (partitions).

Figure 11: Examples for soft tactile toy 'soft Twinkl'™.

### Sensory armchair covers and pockets

- Comfortable and calming to allow residents to self-soothe without drawing attention to themselves.
- Provides instant sensory and reminiscence stimulation.
- Can be self-made - similar to sensory cushions.
- Deep pockets with plenty of space to hide objects, images, etc.

Figure 12: Similarly to sensory cushions, sensory armchair covers can have buttons and ribbons attached, or feature a gridwork of various textile materials and techniques such as crocheted and knitted.

### Tactile activities

- Playing with different media: sand, water, jelly, flour, fragrant play dough.
- Making art work: the process of making is multi sensory and can involve finger-painting, tearing and crunching paper, sticking, sprinkling, mixing etc.

Figure 13: Examples of art work where the process of making is a multi sensory experience: oil, beads, sequins and buttons are mixed on foil and then sealed (seen at Incoherence Showcase).

### Age appropriate and usable

Choosing sensory equipment can be challenging as many of the items that are of the right sensory level are often aimed at children. It is important to select equipment and items that give the right level of stimulation but are not perceived as juvenile or childish, in particular in respect to the aesthetics. Also, have the feelings and views of family and relatives of the residents need to be considered if space and equipment appear not age appropriate. However, images should not be as complex that the person with dementia cannot understand them (see also section 'Art work').

Figure 20 - 21: Successful examples of age appropriate toys for adults: the movement of the glitter or the independent coloured ribbons suspended in clear liquid creates an enchanting display of light and colours which can be fascinating for people of all ages.

### Dignity

The way care workers interact and communicate with the person with dementia is critical in maintaining dignity; if the interaction is appropriate and the pieces of equipment is targeted at the right level of ability then dignity is maintained. Focus on what kind of stimulation it provides and reflect on how it might make you feel.

A validation approach can also be used when presenting items or equipment by talking about what that type of stimulation might remind you of. For example, the epic fibre spray is twinkling; it reminds me of Christmas lights, how did you spend Christmas with your family?

The Guide Book can be downloaded at:  
[kingston.ac.uk/sensoryroom](http://kingston.ac.uk/sensoryroom)