

Improving the emotional well-being of people with dementia

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The research project evolved from broader consideration in respect to the **rising number of people affected by dementia**, the rapid growth of an ageing population, and the over-prescribed use of antipsychotic medication in dementia treatment. Alternative treatment methods and cost-effective interventions optimising dementia care are urgently needed.

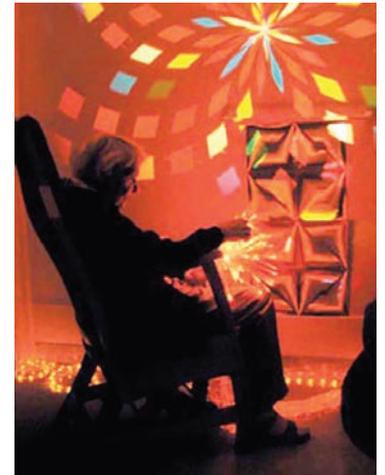
Against this background the research examines **strategies of providing specific sensory experiences for people living with dementia – focusing on Multi Sensory Environments (MSEs), their design, and current and future demanding role** within homes caring for residents living with this condition.

The **aesthetic and functional qualities of MSE facilities** (such as material/colour/imagery applied, accessibility, spatial set up, usability) currently provided in care homes for people with dementia, and **their success and failure**, are examined and evaluated.

MSEs are now widely used in dementia care. But evidence suggests that they often fail to succeed because of **inadequate design and arrangements not addressing the needs of people with dementia or older people in general** (Dalke et al 2010).

Conversely, to date no design informed investigation has addressed the provision of sensory experiences for people with dementia and their carers and there is a lack of research into the future design of MSEs for this user group. Consequently, in the case of care home operators there is a tendency to rely on supplier led convenience design solutions which are not necessarily informed by systematic user-centred design research.

The project investigates to what extent the above criticisms can be substantiated via a study involving care homes in Greater London that have some type of MSE facility. The study aims to establish whether improved overall design of the MSE could add value to the experience maximising the benefit for the users and their carers, subsequently informing the **development of design ideas and recommendations for a MSE template tailored towards people with dementia and their physical and emotional needs.**



Examples MSE applications for older people living with dementia disseminated via the internet. Left image: The multi sensory room at the Mount centre of Leeds Partnership NHS Foundation Trust. Source: communitycare.co.uk/blogs/mental-health/2010/02/multisensory-snoezelen-room-fo.html (viewed 12 May 2012); Right image: A resident of the Brian Center Health & Rehabilitation, Brevard, North Carolina, USA, enjoys a multi sensory experience in the Snoezelen room (Photo by Julie Cooley) Source: tlmagazine.com/article/2005-optima-award-entry-adventure-snoezelen-therapy (viewed 12 May 2012)

Multi Sensory Environments (MSE), sometimes also referred to as Snoezelen or Sensory Rooms, offer stimulation to the senses of vision, touch, hearing and smell, and sometimes also taste for diverse populations. Claiming to be a failure-free, non-directive, enabling environment, it is particularly effective for individuals with a low level of intellectual skills and high sensory perception. MSEs aim to enhance feelings of comfort and wellbeing supporting positive emotions, relieve stress and pain, maximise a person's potential to focus, support communication and memory performance. These effects are facilitated by a specially dedicated and designed space, or by mobile equipment to be set up in various locations, including the user's home.

In dementia care, the observed benefits of MSE include improved function and alleviated psychological and behavioural symptoms e.g. challenging behaviour and depression, increased appropriate communication, and improved staff morale (Baillon et al 2002). Occupational therapists advocate the beneficial use of MSEs, backed up by recent scientific research supporting their effectiveness as a strategy for enhancing functional performance in individuals with dementia (Collier et al 2010).



The images above show MSE/Sensory Rooms in several care homes recently visited. In these examples the set up focuses on placing MSE equipment in the room only. Apart from this the rooms' appearance in respect to seating, curtains, carpet etc. does not differ from the rest of the house. The furniture does not offer a different seating position to the usual. Often the space is cluttered with distracting and unnecessary accessories or furniture. Curtains leak light from outside, and the imagery applied is sometimes childlike. Multi sensory stimulation is insufficient as often there is not enough variety of tactile experience on offer. Further, there is a lack of training amongst care staff regarding how to use the equipment: e.g. the fibre optics curtain (called 'Light shower') is meant to be and touched, played with, and even wrapped around one's body, and not to be fixed to the wall as seen in the above images.



Image on the left: A 'tactile cushion' - especially designed for people with dementia providing tactile and visual experiences, distributed by PSS, a charity that provides care, health and community services in UK.

The above pictures show MSE facilities and equipment developed by ROMPA, one of the largest suppliers of MSE, presented on their website. Most of their products are geared towards younger user groups. Sensory rooms more appropriate for older users are not promoted. Source: rompa.com/multi-sensory-environments-rooms (viewed 12 May 2012)