Sensory therapy for dementia patients

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Healthy Spaces

Here are some simple activities caregivers can do at home to stimulate the sense of sight, sound, touch and taste of patients.

Touch – in the form of hugs, stroking or just a simple handshake – can be soothing for older people, who often do not get enough of it. They may appreciate a gentle massage or a back rub before they sleep. If they do not have diabetes or sensory problems, you can encourage them to soak their feet in lukewarm water as a relaxing nighttime ritual. Massage the feet with oil afterwards and wrap them in a warm towel. While touch from another person is preferred, people with dementia can also find comfort in the touch of a furry toy or the warmth of a water bottle. Pets may also provide some comfort, but make sure this does not cause the older person to trip.

Sound

Listening to music can also be calming or uplifting, depending on the individual’s musical preferences. The key is to find out what their associations come to mind. For older people who are non-communicative, you can also be helpful to burn some incense or aroma therapy.

Smell

Scents, when associated with a favourite food or a pleasant memory, can have a calming effect. Aromatherapy has been shown in studies to be useful as an adjunct therapy in alleviating agitated behaviour in people with dementia.

Taste

Taste can be particularly stimulating for the older person or related to his surroundings. They can be sounds from familiar activities, for instance, the sounds made on a chopping board, if the elderly person was a housewife. Or they can be sounds that people hear every day, such as cars honking and birds chirping. Let the older person listen to these sounds and encourage him to share whatever associations come to mind.

Sight

It can be particularly soothing for the older person to look through and talk about a favourite photograph of family, friends and childhood. He may appreciate a gentle rocking chair, which is calming or energizing for a person with dementia. Familiar music or singing can be helpful to soothe or energize.

Touch

In a noisy house, one’s instinct might be to seek a peaceful retreat behind closed doors. But the same person is just as likely to become restless and agitated if left alone and isolated at home, for the comfort of some white noise.

A person’s cognitive ability to seek balance when his senses are overstimulated or understimulated seems to come naturally. Not so for people with the neurological disorder called dementia, which robs their mental and problem-solving abilities to decline, said Ms Tan Xuanhong, a senior occupational therapist at Changi General Hospital. When overpowered by sensory input, they are at a “cognitive loss” and cannot help themselves. This can affect their mood and behaviour.

Ms Tan said: “There is already chaos going on in their minds, so when there is additional chaos around them, they become inflamed or agitated, without knowing why or how to solve the problem.

Hence, the unsettled feeling could equally be due to too much stimulation, said Ms Sabrina Ow Yong, occupational therapist at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. For instance, someone with dementia may find it frightening to be in a quiet room, like their bedroom.

Ms Tan said: “They need some stimulation but they do not know how to go about seeking it. This negative sense of well-being may lead to withdrawal or aggression.”

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