



Effects of Sensory Interventions on an Inpatient Psychiatric Unit

Patient's experience of hospitalization and the symptoms related to mental illness may reduce the capacity to manage negative moods and emotions and lead to a loss of behavioral control. This, in turn, may result in the use of patient restraints and/or seclusion to maintain patient safety. Nurses and occupational therapists working on the in-patient psychiatric unit of Massachusetts General Hospital partnered in an effort to explore sensory interventions to improve patient stress response and so reduce the need for restraint and seclusion.

Grant money and donations were used to equip a Sensory Room with interventions including:

1. visual items (water fountain, and a large saltwater aquarium with brightly colored fish and coral)
2. tactile items (weighted blankets, koosh balls, colored blocks, puzzles, back and neck massagers)
3. olfactory items (aromatic oils and lotions)
4. auditory interventions (relaxation tapes, music, and nature sound machine); and
5. proprioceptive items (glider rocker).

Patients were provided easy access to this room and equipment and were often encouraged to participate by staff particularly during times of increase distress. In addition, preventative interventions were incorporated into the admission process. A safety check list helped staff to identify those patients at risk for dangerous behaviors and develop and individualized treatment plans.

Since the implementation of the Sensory Room and preventative interventions, there has been a marked decline in the use of restraints and seclusion. Incidence has dropped by 49% and the total numbers of hours patients spend in restraint and seclusion has dropped by 67% over the 5 years since initiation of these new interventions. In addition, further research has been completed on the effects of sensory interventions in the setting of this Sensory Room (SR) on emotional states, emotion regulation, hemodynamic function of psychiatric in-patients, and subjective patient reports following exposure to these interventions.

Results demonstrated that sensory interventions create significant changes in emotional states, thus providing a useful tool to assist patients with emotional modulation. Patient reports are affirming. Per one patient, "I liked the relaxation tools, the massage the most, that was one of my favorite things...I liked the puzzles, they took my mind off things. On the whole, it was a really good experience." And another, "It was very pleasurable, the time passed very quickly, I chose one thing at a time and felt very distracted and into the sensory things. I was into it. I felt stimulated coming out of the room and it felt wonderful."