

Multi-sensory environment research influences dementia care

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Research released at the Inside Out Festival in London has shed new light on the positive impact multi-sensory environments can have when caring for people living with dementia.

Academic experts Dr Anke Jakob, from Kingston University London, and Dr Lesley Collier, from the University of Southampton, have unveiled a new guide for care homes, *How to make a sensory room for people living with [dementia](#)*, which showcases the contributions universities make to the capital's cultural life. The publication highlights the importance of having a space specifically designed to meet the needs of people living with the condition.

Sensory rooms provide gentle stimulation of sight, sound, touch, taste, smell and movement in a controlled way, Dr Jakob explained. "They are used to enhance feelings of comfort and well-being, relieve stress and pain and maximise a person's potential to focus, all of which help improve communication and memory," she said.

"Traditionally, these spaces have been geared more towards younger adults and children with physical or learning disabilities, using elements such as LED lighting as a visual stimulant. However, our approach emphasises the benefits of addressing all the senses to support residents diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia in a care home environment. Soft textiles, familiar everyday objects, interesting things to smell and taste, sound and film can all have an important part to play in that process."

The guide contains advice about the different materials and tools that can be used to stimulate senses, such as scents like lavender to relax and calm, sounds from the great outdoors and foods with specific flavours. These can all help to improve mood, evoke memories and engage people living with dementia.

The new research builds on previous studies undertaken at both Kingston University and the University of Southampton. Earlier work carried out by Kingston University's Design Research Centre had noted that, while many care homes had multi-sensory rooms, they were often left unused, Dr Jakob said. "Reasons for this varied – some were not set up in a way that appealed to residents, some staff did not feel the spaces would benefit the people they looked after and sometimes care workers had not been shown how to use the equipment," she added.

Meanwhile, research conducted by Dr Collier at the University of Southampton had found that, if a sensory environment was adapted to individual needs, improvement in performance, mood and behaviour could be achieved.

"Results showed that 74 per cent of people who took part in the study improved in motor performance – their ability to undertake everyday tasks – and 63 per cent improved in cognitive tasks – their ability to remember, problem solve and judge what to do in everyday activities," Dr Collier said.

The new guide pulls together some of the best work already being done in care homes both in the United Kingdom and internationally and builds on it to create a framework for others to use.

"The role of a designer is to look at space as a whole and consider how aspects such as colour, lighting, materials, furniture and sound can best work together to produce an area that will give people with dementia a

positive experience," Dr Jakob said. "Providing a soft, warm, quiet space where residents can feel secure is vital. For example, flickering lights and shadows may be confusing and irritating, so soft lighting should be used along with plain fabrics covering walls and ceilings."

People with dementia faced many challenges – one of which was being overloaded with sensory stimulation, Dr Collier added. "This can prevent them from carrying out normal everyday tasks to their full potential," she said.

"We hope the guide will help [care homes](#) develop appropriate environments for their residents but also that other people who care for friends or relatives with dementia can draw inspiration from it so they can improve the lives of their loved ones."

Maizie Mears-Owen, Head of Dementia at Care UK, acted as an advisor on the project and provided the researchers with access to homes and multi-sensory environments within the Care UK network.

"As a result of the research, Care UK will be embracing an integrated approach to creating multi-sensory environments in our homes," she said. "We fully appreciate the need for meaningful stimulation and creating relaxing, calming spaces where people living with dementia can 'just be'. Although LED lights have been shown to have a positive impact on residents' mood and behaviour, we mustn't forget the more subtle ways in which people are naturally stimulated through sounds, taste, scents and touch – all of which can have a more emotive impact than sight."

Provided by University of Southampton

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