



Using the Five Senses to Support Residents with Dementia

Stimulating the senses for someone with Alzheimer’s disease or another form of dementia can positively or negatively affect his or her mood, behaviors and even sleep patterns. That is why activities that focus on the five senses can be a big part of providing person-centered care to a resident with dementia.



The Sense of Sight

Visual stimulation can involve light, color, shapes, motion or a combination of these. To appeal to the sense of sight, use any of the following, ask the resident what he or she likes or develop your own ideas:

- Look at photographs of resident’s family or friends
- Read newspapers or magazines
- Look at or create colorful artwork
- Collect autumn leaves
- Watch nature videos or documentaries
- Provide natural light or sit near windows



The Sense of Hearing

Auditory stimulation can affect a person’s mood. Music, natural sounds or other familiar noises can be calming. Ask the resident what sounds he or she likes or provide him or her with some of these options:

- Listen to music that means something to the resident
- Provide an instrument or play the piano together
- Plan a sing-along
- Exercise with music
- Attend a local concert or watch a concert on video



The Sense of Smell

Some of our strongest memories are tied to our sense of smell. Unfortunately, smell and taste naturally deteriorate with age. You can keep the sense of smell sharp by providing stimulating aromas. For example:

- Decorate with fresh flowers
- Provide oils or candles with strong scents (e.g., lavender, lemon, peppermint)
- Bake bread or a favorite food with resident
- Provide scented soaps or lotions



The Sense of Taste

Like smell, a favorite meal or a special dish can remind us of holidays, special occasions or other happy events from our past. To appeal to a resident’s sense of taste, you can:

- Learn his or her favorite spices and cook with them
- Dip veggies or pretzels in various sauces (e.g., BBQ, ranch, honey mustard)
- Keep a variety of herbal or flavored teas
- Host a tasting event (e.g., chocolate, cheese, yogurt)
- Cook resident’s favorite meal with him or her



The Sense of Touch

Anything we come into contact with has a texture, a temperature, a shape. Touching something sends a message to our brain, so tactile stimulation is also brain stimulation. To incorporate touch into activities:

- Massage the resident’s shoulders, feet or hands
- Collect pinecones
- Comb the resident’s hair
- Encourage family to bring their pet on visits

Resources: “Dementia and Using the Five Senses,” written by Asha Grinnell for Dementia Today, www.seniorhomes.com; “Sensory Stimulation for Alzheimer’s and Dementia,” written by John Schmid for Best Alzheimer’s Products, www.best-alzheimers-products.com

