

Multi-Sensory Rooms, an Introduction

History

In the late 1970's, two Dutch psychologists developed the idea of Snoezelen Rooms, initially as a therapy for those with learning disabilities. Over time this initial idea has merged with the use of a wide range of multi-sensory stimulation to provide special environments for people with a variety of disabilities, disorders and conditions including dementia, autism, intellectual disability, brain injury, chronic pain, and for those in palliative care. The terms Snoezelen Rooms, White Rooms and Multi-Sensory Rooms tend to be used interchangeably but, as the term 'Snoezelen' is now a registered trademark of an English sensory equipment supplier, we prefer to use the name Multi-Sensory Room or MSR.

Design and Function

Multi-Sensory Rooms and the equipment in them are designed to create a stimulating and yet calming atmosphere. They can be set up for children or adults of all ages and can be installed for therapy and education, or for recreation and leisure. There are about six commonly used types of multi-sensory rooms. These include the white room, dark room, sound room, interactive room, water room, and soft play room. Outdoor environments have also been developed including multi-sensory gardens. These environments have many similarities, and their differences are based on the specific population they are designed for and the aims that the provision of the environment is designed to achieve.

Most Multi-Sensory Rooms (MSRs) typically have a bubble column, special lighting with a projector to cast slow-moving images or colours around the walls, a mirror ball with spotlight and fibre-optic sprays. There may be or other lamps, music or sound equipment and aromatherapy materials. A variety of tactile items can be provided, such as cushions and vibrating pillows, as well as special hanging chairs and massage chairs. Panels with a variety of textures such as rough surfaces, stiff bristles, smooth mirrors, beads, or soft and squishy items are often also included. Activity walls can be custom built to provide a range of tactile, as well as electronic audiovisual stimulation.

Fans or bubble blowers sometimes feature, as well as ball pools, water beds, swings or vibrating mattresses. Thus there is equipment to provide visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic and olfactory stimulation.

As MSRs are often be used for more active activities as well as relaxation, much of the equipment can be designed or modified to provide switch interactivity. Special switches to suit the physical abilities of users can be used to start or modify the behaviour of the equipment, thus changing the sensory experience. This allows the rooms to be used in active programs, where switch skills, cause-effect understanding, concentration and memory abilities can be developed in a fun, focused environment.

A safe, client-focused and failure-free experience

The idea of an MSR is to provide stimulation, and yet be calming. It aims to provide a “failure-free” experience, allowing pleasurable stimulation without the need for verbal abilities or requiring specific outcomes. The focus is to help the user of the room to gain maximum pleasure from the sensory activity they and their carer are involved in.

The approach to using an MSR is generally non-directive, without the need for intellectual or verbally mediated activity in terms of following instructions or rules, and regular exposure seems to be more effective. Essentially, one would allow the user of the space the time and opportunity to experience at their own pace what the room has to offer. One may not use or activate immediately all equipment that the room has available, but gradually introduce more of the sensory stimulation, allowing the cues given by the client to guide the carer.

The time in the MSR should be client-focused, with the wishes of that individual determining the activity. Their attention, interest and expressions of pleasure or displeasure are the basis for participation in the MSR. Obviously the responses to the experience of the room will be highly individual and carers need to be sensitive to the client, suspending their expectations and judgements, closely monitoring any responses they notice in their clients. For example, a client with dementia and poor eyesight may be frightened by a “flying” bird in the MSR, while another whose vision is not impaired may be delighted by the same projected image. Some may find soft colours projected onto the walls soothing, but become confused by pictures. Music may be pleasurable for some clients, but too stimulating for others. In another situation, one who is tactile defensive will not want to touch or even have near them any tactile stimuli, and should not be pushed with this, but allowed to explore other aspects of the MSR. Over time, and perhaps being close to others and watching them touch and enjoy the tactile stimulation, this client may begin to feel safe enough to give this sensory experience a try.

Client Outcomes

The specific benefits of Multi-Sensory Rooms are hard to assess. There are countless anecdotal reports of improved mood, fewer disruptive behaviours, decreased anxiety and fear, improved communication and enhanced interpersonal interactions. However, rigorous scientific studies are relatively few. This is probably because MSRs can be so varied in what they contain and provide, and are used in so many different ways with a broad range of users that it becomes impossible to control all the variables required for a stringent study. It would seem that some behaviours, such as aggression and self-injury do improve, especially whilst the client is in the MSR environment. Some evidence suggests that challenging behaviours in dementia may be reduced after MSR experiences. If the reader is interested in following up on the research, it is best to look at internet sites dealing with “Snoezelen” rooms and also ones regarding specific disorders such as dementia or autism. This can give access to the latest scientific evidence with reference to particular behaviours and contexts.

Meanwhile, reports continue to flow in, detailing the positive effects of exposure to Multi-Sensory Rooms, and not just for direct clients of special schools or nursing homes. We have been told of the positive changes that have been effected in staff to client interactions in a variety of settings. It would seem that in the MSR both the carer and the client can simply experience something pleasant together, which has the effect of reducing the pressure and stress sometimes felt in normal day to day interactions. Thus MSRs may be of benefit to staff as well as clients. Another unexpected positive report from the aged care area has been that the MSR has helped with visits by family to dementia sufferers, especially when grandchildren come. The MSR has provided a venue where the visiting family have been able to enjoy a time and space together with the dementia suffering relative, making the visit more pleasurable all around and thereby increasing the likelihood that visits will be repeated. Such an outcome is surely worthwhile at many levels.

Multi-Sensory Room Design

Technical Solutions Australia design and install Multi-Sensory Rooms which can cater to a wide variety of ages, abilities and purposes. We discuss the aims of the room, offer suggestions, and formulate a complete design. We are happy to design a new room, or an upgrade to an existing room, to accommodate specific needs and budgets. And we can advise regarding room modifications and electrical works. Please feel free to talk with us if you are considering establishing or modifying your Multi-Sensory Environment. For further reading and equipment ideas, see: <http://www.tecsol.com.au/Sensory.htm>