



Empowerment Tool for Understanding how Noise affects Persons with Dementia

Of all the senses, hearing is the one that has the most significant impact on people with dementia in terms of quality of life, because dementia can worsen the effects of sensory changes by altering how the person perceives external stimuli, such as noise and light. As one's hearing is linked to balance this also leads to a higher risk of falls either through loss of balance or through an increase in disorientation as a result of people trying to orientate themselves in an environment that is overstimulating and noisy.

People with dementia respond to noise on a sensory level rather than intellectually. Note that in the Dementia Live experience, participants body language will often change when startle effects are introduced in the confusion sound. This sensitivity can change over time and even during the course of a day. Persons living with dementia have a reduced ability to understand their sensory environment. Sensitivity alterations, combined with age-related hearing deterioration, is often why people react to their situation rather than being supported or enabled by it.

If other senses are on overload at the same time as hearing (such as sight, touch, smell, and taste) the effect can be a dramatic change in the behavior of a person with dementia. The following tips will help caregivers in reducing what often is called 'noise pollution.' We will also discuss how to effectively engage noise as a means of calm and comfort for persons living with dementia.

TIPS FOR REDUCING NOISE:

Dining Areas: In a care community, the dining area is often challenged with multiple layers of noise that can cause unrest and agitation. If a TV or radio is on at the same time that staff is talking, dishes or cutlery clattering, together this can lead to a heightened sense of disorientation. While it is not possible to remove this noise altogether, it is indeed possible to observe how much noise is taking place. Perhaps a solution would be to have quiet, calm background music, ask the dining staff to refrain or limit conversations, and certainly make extra efforts to reduce the clatter of dishes. Observe the resident's reaction and continue to make adjustments as needed.

Open Spaces: Be aware that noise in public areas might sound louder than in enclosed spaces due to sound reverberation. Something as simple as a med cart being wheeled down an open hallway can often sound noisier than it indeed is. For persons with dementia, whose sensory changes become more muddled as symptoms progress, public spaces are often frightening and overwhelming. Be sensitive to these areas and watch

for signs of agitation or anxiety. If you have no control over the sound effects, then gently move the person to a smaller, quieter place.

Bathrooms: Acoustics in bathrooms can be particularly challenging. Flowing water and a flushing toilet can startle a person with dementia. It may be helpful to have soothing music on while showering. Caregivers might coach the person, letting them know that they will be flushing the toilet, so they are not alarmed by the sound.

At Night: It is essential that persons with dementia have a good night sleep and can stay on a regular sleep schedule. If there are unfamiliar or disturbing noises at night, or even noise from washing machines, TVs or other household items, it may keep the person from getting and staying in a deep sleep. Caregivers should work to keep noise to a minimum, especially for those who are more sensitive to noise.

At Home:

- ◇ Limit the TV being on unless a person is watching it. Don't use the TV as background noise.
- ◇ Limit the use of alarms, phones, doorbells and alarm bells. These can be frightening and cause agitation.
- ◇ Mealtime should be calm and relaxing. Quiet music may be acceptable, but limit multiple conversations, clanging dishes and TVs.
- ◇ Turn off the TV or music if you want to engage in conversation.