Decreasing Assaults on a Locked Mental Health Unit through the Creation of a Sensory Modulation Room

**Introduction**

VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) is a three-division integrated healthcare system that proudly serves the Veteran population throughout Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia. University Drive serves as the acute care facility and has 146 operating beds distributed among medicine, surgery, neurology and critical care. This also includes a large primary care outpatient clinic. VAPHS is affiliated with the University of Pittsburgh Schools of Medicine, Dental Medicine, and various allied health programs. The Highland Drive division houses 79 inpatient behavioral health beds. The H. John Heinz Division is home to a 262-bed community living center; has a complete adult day health care center and offers a variety of outpatient services. Heinz also has a 65-bed Veterans recovery center and 31 psychiatric residential rehabilitation treatment beds.

**Abstract**

The Assault Aggregate Root Cause Analysis Team at VA Pittsburgh completes a yearly review of assaultive patient behavior in the Acute Care Long Term Care, and Behavioral Health Divisions. The team recognized that the largest percentage of assaults (77%) occurred on the extended psychiatric unit treating Veterans for resistant psychiatric disorders. A creative opportunity for improvement was recognized following review of the environment. Escalating and aggressive patient behavior was handled without privacy and in full view of other Veterans. A Sensory Modulation Room based on the concept of daytime timeout stations was designed to provide privacy, decrease stimuli and promote relaxation using aromatherapy, massage pillows, weighted blankets, clay, squeeze balls, reading materials on a variety of audiovisual relaxation items. After initiation of this room, the assault rate on the extended psychiatric unit dropped dramatically by 50%.

**Objectives**

1. The participant will define what a sensory modulation room is and the rationale behind its utilization.
2. The participant will describe the design, costs, and benefits of a sensory modulation room on a locked inpatient mental health unit.

**Plan**

In January 2010 a Sensory Modulation Room (SMR) was opened on 3 East. It has shown to be a significant intervention with a decrease of assaults on that unit. Research has shown that psychosis and excessive sensory stimulation have been major prepositions in aggressive behavior on psychiatric units. Many of the Veterans on 3 East have treatment resistant illness in which medications have not effectively treated the underlying psychiatric conditions. Sensory modulation rooms have been shown to decrease anxiety and agitation in dementia and the pervasive developmental disorder population. Elderly patients present special problems. There are factors that complicate the assessment and treatment especially those with psychotic symptoms. Cognitive impairment increases with age and can also be a major impediment to assessment or treatment (Lipton 1997). Ambulatory demented patients who are combative may victimize other non-ambulatory patients. This may elicit combative responses in return by behavior in an intrusive, boisterous manner-for example by pulling at blankets, singing, or yelling loudly, or simply entering another patient’s room (Mayers 1994). Although such rooms have been successfully implemented in various psychiatric facilities throughout the United States, very little research regarding their effectiveness in psychiatry has been documented.

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**Conclusion**

Currently under construction at VAPHS is a state of the art Sensory Room that will house three inpatient mental health units that will allow for a safe, calm private therapeutic atmosphere for recovery. Each new unit will contain a SMR to continue to provide a retreat for individuals with aggressive behaviors or those who require sensory distractions on the extended psychiatric unit.

**References**


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