

SENSORY MODULATION

SENSORY MODULATION AS A SUITE OF CLINICAL TOOLS IN MENTAL HEALTH SETTINGS

This factsheet introduces sensory modulation to planners and funders. Further introductory information on sensory modulation can be viewed on the Te Pou website www.tepou.co.nz or by contacting the Te Pou clinical project lead (see contact details below).

Clinical applications of sensory modulation

Sensory modulation is an over-arching term given to a suite of tools used to assist mental health service users to moderate their responses when distressed. Sensory tools can, for example, be used to help service users who are agitated to become calmer; those who are anxious to feel less so; or help activate service users who are depressed. Clinicians also use sensory modulation to help some service users to lessen feelings of self-harm.

In acute mental health inpatient units sensory modulation is a clinician-guided intervention that occurs after a sensory assessment conducted with a trained clinician. Sensory modulation can either be a planned intervention or it can be used 'as necessary'. Sensory modulation most often occurs in a dedicated space called a sensory room. In sensory rooms service users are able to choose from a variety of sensory tools. Examples of these tools include audio and video equipment, soft or pleasant feeling materials, pleasant aromas, electronic massage chairs and small weighted blankets for the lap or shoulders that provide a sensation of pressure.

Sensory rooms are currently in place in a number of mental health settings in New Zealand. They mainly occur in acute mental health inpatient units but clinicians in some DHBs have set up sensory rooms in other clinical environments, such as community mental health centres. Sensory tools are also being used outside of sensory rooms and are being successfully used as part of care planning for individual service users.

Sensory modulation has a relatively long clinical history with occupational therapists working with children with developmental disabilities. Over the last decade it has been effectively and safely applied in mental health settings overseas including parts of the United States of America and Australia.

Research into sensory modulation

Research evidence about the effectiveness of sensory modulation is limited because of methodological challenges. However, Te Pou is supporting research into the effectiveness and acceptability of sensory modulation in New Zealand settings through a number of research approaches. The results of these studies will be publicised when known.

Feedback from clinicians and service users who have used sensory modulation supports early research results which suggest that sensory modulation is a safe, effective clinical approach that is well supported by service users.

Cost of sensory rooms

Sensory rooms set up as part of the Te Pou supported research trial cost approximately \$4000 for state-of-the-art equipment. Some DHBs have set up sensory rooms for less through the purchase of second-hand equipment.

One of the most expensive items are weighted blankets, at a cost of between \$300-\$500 through commercial suppliers (depending on the blanket size, numbers purchased, and special arrangements with suppliers). Weighted blankets are, anecdotally, one of the most clinically useful tools and are popular with service users because of the sense of comfort they can give. Clinicians in some DHBs have been producing their own weighted blankets because of budget limitations. This approach, although innovative, transfers the fiscal cost to clinician time in what is likely to be an ineffective way. For this reason we recommend that weighted blankets (and other equipment) be budgeted for and commercially purchased.

Sensory rooms need to have a small associated budget for ongoing replacement of some equipment that may run out or go missing and for the maintenance of larger items, such as massage chairs.

DHBs have been innovative in creating space for sensory rooms. There is likely to be a set-up cost to make the room useful for sensory modulation for example, painting or fitting curtains for privacy. The cost of this set up will depend on the type of space available.

Further information

For further background information on sensory modulation visit the Te Pou website www.tepou.co.nz. Please also feel free to contact Tony Farrow by email or phone via the contact details below.

Key contact

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For the most up to date information on this project please visit www.tepou.co.nz