Ageing and Dual Sensory Loss

Able AUSTRALIA

Common causes of sensory impairments

As people get older, there is a greater likelihood of deterioration of both vision and hearing.

Common causes of hearing impairment are:

- Otosclerosis, a growth around the bones in the middle ear resulting in conductive hearing loss
- Sensori neural or nerve deafness which results from changes in the inner ear

Common causes of vision impairment in older people are:

- Glaucoma which can result in tunnel vision
- Age related macular degeneration which results in loss of central vision
- Cataracts which results in blurry vision
- Diabetic retinopathy which is now the most common cause of vision impairment and results in patchy vision with blind spots in both the central and peripheral vision.

CATARACTS

GLAUCOMA

MACULAR DEGENERATION

DIABETIC RETINOPATHY

Identifying sensory loss

The effects of deteriorating vision and hearing can appear similar to dementia so it is important to have regular vision and hearing checks.

Signs of reducing vision and hearing include:

- frequently asking for repetition
- trouble hearing on the telephone
- complaints that people are mumbling
- turning the volume up loud on the television
- not responding when their back is turned
- taking over the conversation to avoid listening
- avoiding or complaining of glare
- bumping into furniture
- needing extra light and holding reading material closer
- difficulty recognising faces

Additional age related issues

As well as coming to terms with reduced vision and hearing, older people are also likely to experience:

- physical frailty
- arthritis
- hypertension
- diabetes
- greater risk of stroke and progressive neurological disorders

All factors must be conidered to ensure physical and cognitive impairments are taken into account.

Communication

Communication is an issue for any one with dual sensory impairment as they typically experience difficulty

- lip reading
- hearing soft or high pitched sounds
- seeing facial expressions
- reading turn taking signals during conversation
- concentrating for long conversations
- hearing in background noise or over long distances

So it is important to implement the following strategies to optimise good communication.

Modify the environment by:

- reducing background noise
- reducing reverberation or echo
- Reduce distance
- consider lighting
- consider contrast - clothing makes a difference to how visible you are and seeing gesture, signs and body language.
- sit on the persons preferred side eg. Better hearing or vision
- ensure the person is wearing their glasses and hearing aids and that the hearing aids are on and working.

Modify your speech by:

- speaking slowly
- speaking clearly
- maintain good volume
- maintain eye contact
- use shorter sentences
- pause between sentences

Modify the conversation by:

- getting the persons attention and introducing yourself before speaking
- pause to give the person time to respond or ask for clarification
- rephrase if the message hasn't been understood
- be aware of the persons facial expression which may indicate they haven't heard your message

Sighted guide

When guiding a person with dual sensory impairment tap the back of their hand so they can locate your arm. They will grasp your arm just above the elbow. Walk with your arm relaxed one step ahead of the person. Let them know when you are approaching obstacles such as stairs, doors, roads or narrow pathways. Talk about key land marks in the environment to help orient the person.

To optimise people's independence in moving safely:

- ensure good lighting
- reduce background noise and reverberative surfaces
- maximize contrast of key features of the environment eg door handles, door frames, edge of steps.
- reduce dangers and hazards for example open doors, objects left in pathways

Isolation

People with dual sensory loss often experience considerable isolation due to difficulties in communication and their reduced independence. It is important to take the time to learn how best to communicate with each individual and learn about their likes and preferences.

Adaptive equipment

There are a variety of adaptive devices and technologies which can assist people with dual sensory impairment to remain independent. These include:

- Closed circuit television, for reading and doing fine detailed work such as knitting
- Audio loop – for listening in 1:1 situations, groups and lectures
- Talking book machines for reading audio books
- Adaptive software for computers which enlarge the screen and convert text to speech

A variety of other low tech devices are available to increase independence around the home such as large print calendars and diaries, high contrast chopping boards and locator dots on appliances such as microwaves and washing machines.

Closing remarks

Adapting to vision and hearing loss associated with ageing can be very challenging. However, there are a number of strategies and aids and equipment which can assist in maintaining good communication and independence. Patience, a sense of humour and a positive attitude will also go a long way to reduce the impacts of a dual sensory impairment.

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