Improving the Quality of Life for Seniors with Dual Sensory Loss

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Although vision and hearing loss are part of the aging process, the idea that nothing can be done about it, is a regrettable, long-held belief.
Dual Sensory Loss

- Dual sensory loss is the combined loss of vision and hearing.
- At the extreme, neither the hearing nor vision can be used as a means of accessing information to participate and be included in the community.
- The two losses impact on each other and multiply the difficulties an individual has to deal with.
Why should health care professionals have knowledge of dual sensory loss?

- Health and safety issues can be prevented
- It can reduce your frustration and promote better relationships with these seniors
- It promotes respect and understanding
- Professionals can make appropriate referrals, i.e. for eye exams, assistive devices
Facts

• 95% of the information that we gather on a daily basis is dependent on our vision and hearing.
• Vision and hearing loss are among the most common age-related conditions affecting seniors.
• Medical conditions can have an impact on the senses, i.e. diabetes.

• Public Health Agency of Canada “Factors that can detract from mental health in the senior years include, stress related to a deterioration of physical health, isolation and loneliness, physical inactivity and chronic physical conditions.”
Impact of dual sensory loss

• Extreme isolation

• Communication barriers
  • Limited number of people who are willing to adapt their communication method in order to relay or share information with the senior

• Mobility barriers

• Limited access to information
  • Often the senior is unable to watch/hear the TV, read the newspaper, overhear conversations during meal times, ask questions and hear/read the response
  • Unaware of technical devices that can assist them
Dual sensory loss is often not evident just by looking at someone

• Would we approach someone differently and attempt to communicate differently if it was obvious that they could not see us or hear us?
This is what you see

This is what I see
Seniors with dual sensory loss
"Being Deafblind has impacted my life by not allowing me to be part of social situations. I am no longer able to be in crowds, be with my family at special occasions because when everyone gets together I am not able to make out what anyone is saying so I end up just sitting there alone. I feel isolated, I can no longer drive, read the newspaper, mail, see and hear the TV properly."
• “There is a popular misconception that as people lose their vision, that their hearing somehow improves to help compensate. Don’t I wish! As someone who has been severely to profoundly hard of hearing all my life, and whose vision has been rapidly declining over the past few years, I can only say: ‘That would be handy.’ But, it ain’t so.”
Simple changes can make a world of difference.
Utilize the sense of touch

- Gentle tap person on their arm to indicate you are there and tell them who you are
- Specific touch to indicate who you are if person can not hear you—sign name
- Let the person feel what you are going to do before doing it, i.e. blood pressure check
- Indicate by touch that you have something for the person, i.e. meal has arrived, pills
- Learn some basic tactile gestures or signs
- Indicate by touch that you are leaving for a minute or going, hand-over-hand hold up index finger or wave goodbye
Utilize some simple communication methods

Two Hand Manual Alphabet

The senior, his/her caregivers, family and friends, can learn this alphabet within an hour!

Can be used as a primary way to communicate or as a back-up to other methods.
Communication Options

Print on Palm

Simply and easy way to relay key words.

Letters can be trace on the palm of the hand or on the person’s leg or back depending on situation.
Communication Options

- Large print notes
- ZoomText – computer software (colour contrast, enlarging font, speech option)
- Pocket Talker
- iPads, tablets
- Picture communication books
Deafness

- If you know someone has no residual hearing, try turning your voice off when you are interacting with them.
- This helps us be mindful that they can not understand what we are saying and so we need to try a different approach.
- Often seniors who are deafened can still speak themselves, so innocently, people think that they can hear.
Some basic gestures

- Nurse/doctor
- Pills
- Drink
- Eat
- Hot/cold
- Danger
- Bath
- Check blood pressure
- Check temperature
- Needle
- Come with me (then gesture why)
- Sit down/rise/lay down
- What are some gestures you’d like to know?
Accessibility in the home

• Colour contrast is important
• Reduce glare and still have adequate lighting
• Keep things in the same place
• Install flashing indicators for phone, door bell, fire alarm
• Label items in large print
So, how do we improve the quality of life for seniors with dual sensory loss?