

## Background:

- Use of sensory approaches within mental health is increasing but limited studies exist into the service user perspective (Craswell et al 2021).
- Sensory approaches have often been evaluated in settings with acutely unwell patients and tend to focus on arousal levels or reduction in restraint (Scanlan & Novak 2015).
- The contribution of sensory strategies to improved self-management can support increased engagement in meaningful activities (Sutton et al 2013).
- Increased focus is needed on the longer-term benefits and transferability of strategy use outside of a dedicated space such as a sensory room.
- This study seeks to broaden this perspective through exploring the experience of female service users within a long-term in-patient mental health rehabilitation environment.

## Aims:

- To explore the sensory strategies used by female service users.
- To identify the place of sensory strategies within a service user's overall recovery journey.
- To provide recommendations for health professionals in developing use of sensory strategies.



## Method:

- Purposive sample approached through a gatekeeper
- Informed consent
- Semi-structured interviews with 4 service users.
- Audio recorded & transcribed verbatim.
- Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the data following guidelines by Pietkiewicz & Smith (2014):

- Initial thoughts and observations noted.
- Each transcript analysed for emergent & over-arching themes.
- Super-ordinate themes identified from shared concepts.
- Themes verified against participant words at each stage.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Barriers to using sensory strategies

"If my mind is set on self-harming ... then probably more than likely I'm going to do that"  
Anna\*

"there's times when I've been, like, gone past sensory stuff ... where I'm probably most of the time angry and in restraint"  
Elen\*

### Theme 2: Emotion regulation

"It kind of gives you the same sensation as self-harming but it doesn't hurt you"  
Elen\*

"if you were going to make a decision on impulse if you like went and like sat in the sensory room ... you slow yourself down don't you"  
Anna\*

### Theme 3: Impact of the environment

"No one normal does that like you don't carry a toy around"  
Clare\*

"I could do all of those things in my room but I don't think it would be the same ... my room's like where I self-harm"  
Anna\*

### Theme 4: Empowerment

"Y' can do what you want, what pleases you [pause] what, um, makes you feel better"  
Jo\*

"You can cope on your own if you've got your sensory box"  
Clare\*

\*pseudonyms



**Ethics:** North West – Preston Research Ethics Committee (Ref no: 19/NW/0480).

## Conclusion:

- The final sample consisted solely of individuals with a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder suggesting this approach perhaps has particular applicability to this client group.
- Dedicated spaces such as a sensory room provide a "safe space" and cue to strategy use but focus is needed on transitioning strategies on from this to support continued benefits.
- Personalisation of strategies and increasing self-awareness is key to the success of the approach.
- Occupational therapists are best placed to support service users in transitioning strategy use beyond a hospital environment and into the context of their daily lives and occupations.



## References

- Craswell, G., Dieleman, C., & Ghanouni, P. (2021) An integrative review of sensory approaches in adult inpatient mental health: implications for occupational therapy in prison-based mental health services. *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*, 37(2), 130-157.
- Pietkiewicz, I. & Smith, J.A. (2014) A practical guide to using interpretative phenomenological analysis in qualitative research psychology. *Psychological Journal*, 20(1), 7-14.
- Scanlan, J. N. & Novak, T. (2015) Sensory approaches in mental health: a scoping review. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 62(5), 277-285.
- Sutton, D., Wilson, M., Van Kessel, K. & Vanderpyl, J. (2013) Optimizing arousal to manage aggression: a pilot study of sensory modulation. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*. 22(6), 500-511.