

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

INVESTIGATING THE EFFECT OF BACKGROUND MEALTIME MUSIC ON THE AGITATION AND FOOD CONSUMPTION OF ADULTS WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY

Researchers

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Aim

1. To examine if calming easy listening music contributed to a pleasant dining experience that reduced agitation and increased the amount of food eaten by adults with a learning disability.
2. To evaluate how different types of background music affected agitation and food consumed.

Project Outline/Methodology

38 subjects with a learning disability, from five different residential care settings, took part in a 3-week study that compared different treatments. After a baseline measure, that gave an indication of how they usually behaved at either their lunchtime or evening meal, the subjects, who were able to feed themselves and who did not have reported hearing loss, ate for one week with calming easy listening playing and for one week without it playing.

A 7-week single-subject study met the second aim. 8 subjects ate with different background music introduced in an A-B-A-C-A-D-A order (A=non music, B=easy listening, C=Scottish country, D=radio). The A-B-A data was included in the 3-week study.

Three types of data were collected and recorded as an average figure for each subject for each week.

1. Food and fluid was weighed before and after it was served to each subject. The food eaten was calculated as a percentage of the food served.
2. The subjects were observed during each meal. The frequency, but not severity, of 13 behaviours was recorded - physical harm, grabbing food, shouting, stripping, restlessness, refusing food, handling objects inappropriately, self injury, repetitious mannerisms, complaining, requesting attention, vocalising and verbal repetition.
3. Before and after each meal, the nursing staff chose one statement from a series of five to describe how agitated each subject appeared to them. A comparison of their two choices indicated any change in the subject's level of agitation during the mealtime.

In addition, a questionnaire examined the nursing staff's perception of the 3-week study.

Key Results

1. Contrary to the literature, under-nutrition and mealtime agitation were not pervasive problems.
2. Background music did not increase food eaten. The baseline (90%) was difficult to better.
3. Analysing mean scores for all subjects showed that calming music did not reduce agitation.
4. Analysing individual responses and separate behaviours showed a significant reduction in restlessness – a predominant baseline behaviour.
5. Positive staff perception of calming background music emerged from the questionnaire data.

Conclusions

1. Calming background music did not effect the frequency of agitation at mealtimes or the amount of food consumed.
2. Positive staff responses perhaps reflected their perception that the intervention was pleasant.

What does this study add to the field?

This study is the first of its kind with subjects with a learning disability. It indicates that calming music does not reduce the agitation at mealtimes or increase the food consumed by people with a learning disability.

Implications for Practice or Policy

The researchers know of one study setting still using calming background music at mealtimes. At present there is no evidence base to argue for the introduction of this approach.

Where to next?

The reduction in restlessness found in this study warrants further investigation in a separate study.

Further details from:

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