

## Shelter Sensory Environment Assessment

Physical layout and how that space is controlled impact a senior’s sense of safety and security in shelters. The physical layout can also contribute to how people interact with each other, affecting how relationships are formed and contributing to the experience of safety. Nonverbal communication about the sense of space is transmitted through a variety of sensory experiences that may not always be apparent without close inspection.

### Visual Cues (Sight)

#### Lighting

With age, even healthy eyes become more sensitive, requiring higher contrasts, more illumination and less glare. Quality lighting assists in completing the daily tasks of life, including navigating a shelter, making for a more comfortable and safe environment. A number of key principles have been identified to ensure quality lighting for seniors.

Key Principles	Rationale	Possible Solutions
Ambient lighting* is uniform within a room and from one room to another	Older eyes take longer to adjust to changes in light levels.	Take advantage of as much outside light as possible by avoiding heavy window coverings  Modern fluorescent lights that have high-frequency electronic ballasts and have good colour
Higher levels of light	Normal age related changes within the eye restrict the light coming in and absorb the light – so more light is needed to compensate.	Well-placed floor lamps and tables lamps can improve comfortability  Adjustable lightning can make spaces comfortable for use in general work as well as close or detailed work  Light in bathrooms must not be blocked by the shower curtain or obscured by mist and fog

\* Ambient light is general lightning in a room for walking around, conversation and identifying objects.

Key Principles	Rationale	Possible Solutions
Glare-free light	Light scatters within the eye causing an increased sensitivity to glare and the loss of the ability to see subtle details at lower levels.	<p>Use woven shades or sheer curtains to diffuse daylight</p> <p>Ensure that light is not reflected off televisions and computers</p> <p>Shielding to hide the direct view of the light source through recesses, valences, frosting, etc can reduce glare</p> <p>Bathroom wall and counter surfaces should be of light to medium colour with matte finishes</p>
Light that helps to distinguish colours	The lens of the eye yellows with age, so proper lighting can help compensate.	<p>Cabinet interiors should be white or light to aid in viewing contents</p> <p>Warm fluorescent lights are recommended in sleeping areas</p>
Light fixtures that do not flicker or hum		Avoid the use of older fluorescent bulbs that use magnetic ballasts

**Based on:** Lighting Your Way to Better Vision  
<http://www.ies.org/pdf/education/lightingforagingeye.pdf>

**Signage**

It is possible for seniors to become lost, even in smaller spaces. Signs that assist in navigation can assist them in feeling confident and safe in the space.

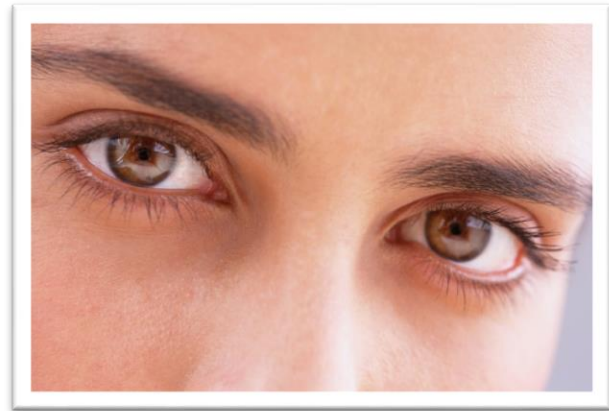
**Questions to consider:**

- Are signs placed to assist in knowing which rooms are what (including closed doors) and how to navigate to important rooms like the bathroom, dining area and laundry?
- Is the information on signs large enough to read easily? (Double check details in the Document Accessibility Guidelines for Seniors)
- Is an effort made to reduce clutter when conveying important information? (Too much and extraneous information increases the chance of missing the important information)



### Other Visual Considerations

- Are the paint colors bright and well-designed or dark and/or blandly institutional?
- Does the environment promote a comfortable feeling, e.g. the use of artwork, comfortable furniture or other personal touches?
- Is staff clothing neutral?
- Are residents wearing any negative emblems (gang or abuse related)?
- How attractive is the outside appearance; grounds, entrance, access and lighting?



### Body Movement

Staff and resident body movement impact sense of personal space for seniors. The speed of approach and pace of body movements by staff and residents will impact a senior's perception of personal space as well as their perception of threat; therefore, staff should be aware of their body language. When seniors read body language they look at the following body movements:

- Head/eyes/lips
- Shoulders/eyebrows/neck
- Legs/arms/fingers
- Posture/stance walking

When working with seniors, consider how each of these may enhance or undermine feelings of safety for seniors. Body language that demonstrates open posture/stance and calm tones, as found in non-violent intervention and active listening training can improve the experience of safety.

### Auditory Cues (Sound)

The way in which noise travels through a building influences a senior's sense of space and their personal safety in it. Seniors do not do well in loud buildings and this will affect relationship building. Personal safety in buildings will be based on a senior's perception of threat. This sense is influenced by noises such as:

- Traffic
- Loudness of music or TVs in the site
- Loudness of people talking and the frequency of yelling in the site
- Building noises such as washing machines, heat and ventilation systems
- Industrial noise, police/ambulance sirens

Consider talking a walk-through your site and spend time taking note of all of the noises in each space. Are there ways to reduce unwanted noise? Is there any ability to create a quiet space that allows retreat?



### Voice

How staff say what they say through the use of vocal tone, cadence (pace) and volume also help shape a senior's sense of stability and safety. It is not just what you say, but how you say it. The rate and rhythm of your speech can generate conflict. Sending different messages with your tone, cadence and volume versus the content of what you are saying confuses the person listening and your point may be lost or misinterpreted. Fast speech cadence can make a senior feel like you are trying to get rid of them or are not interested in their problem. This impacts trust building.

### Olfactory Cues (Smell)

Smell can trigger unexpected behaviours that are linked to past experiences. Smell impacts the sense of a homelike or a clean environment. (Studies suggest that our behaviour improves when we perceive a 'clean' smell) This shapes the sense of stability a person has while in the shelter space.

#### Questions to consider:

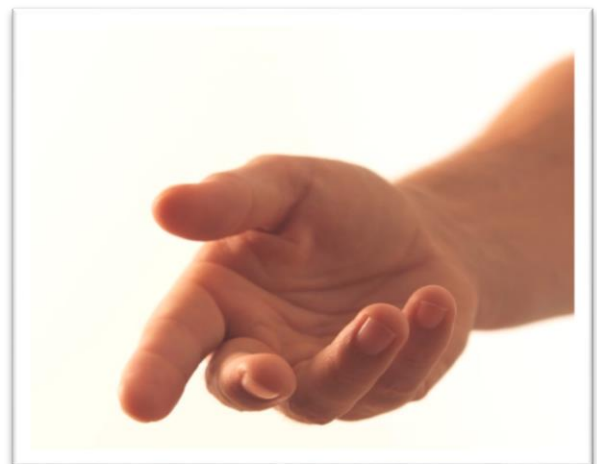
- How could the smells in the space trigger positive or negative memories for residents/guests?
- How do the products that we use promote a sense of cleanliness and/or home?
- How do we ensure that our environment is scent-sensitive for those who experience strong physical reactions to scents? <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/about-us/scent-sensitive-workplace> (both bathrooms and sleeping areas have the potential to be strongly affected)

It's important to remember that we get desensitized to smells that we are exposed to on a daily basis, so these tests may be better done with someone who is not regularly exposed to the environment.

### Tactile Cues (Touch)

Shelters have a sense of touch in their layout, which impacts a senior's sense of stability and comfort. Considering walking around and experiencing the feel of:

- Doorknobs – 'lever' handles are considered easier to use than 'knob' handles for those with mobility issues in their handles
- Linens – the types of laundry soap, etc can impact irritability on sensitive skin
- Soaps – again, consideration of skin sensitivities
- Temperature – seniors often feel the cold more; the ability to access more blankets when sitting or sleeping can be helpful



## Gustatory Cues (Taste)

Seniors can have a number of different dietary needs and can also have health issues that further affect their dietary concerns. These may include

- food allergies/sensitivities
- cultural food requirements
- important dietary requirements
  - [Healthy Eating and Healthy Aging for Adults](#)
  - [Canada's Food Guide](#)
- challenges with eating hard foods
  - [Healthy Eating Guidelines for People with Chewing Difficulties](#)

A senior may feel less empowered to speak out about their dietary needs and so this may be a point of discussion within the shelter orientation.



## Structuring Time

Having consistent daily routines and structure will help seniors stabilize in the shelter. The trauma of homelessness has impacted their sense of safety and stability. While routines may be helpful, it is also beneficial to consider:

- Seniors may benefit from more control over time in accessing the shelter. This may include when they must wake up, leave the shelter, be able to return to rest during the day, and nightly curfews.
- Seniors may need more time to complete tasks and process information. This is particularly important when considering the structure of shelter orientation and case management.