

Introducing Aromatherapy to the Prison Environment

Aromatherapy for improving behaviors among incarcerated individuals

Agency: Pennsylvania Department of Corrections State Correctional Institution (SCI) Retreat

Trial Duration: 09/26/16–01/27/17

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Context

Correctional facilities house people confined to cells that serve as all-in-one bathrooms, bedrooms and eating areas. Poor ventilation can exacerbate unpleasant smells, but aromatherapy might help to mask unpleasant odors, thus improving satisfaction and behaviors.

Key Finding

Although limited by a small sample size, the use of aromatherapy may be beneficial for improving resident behavior.

*BetaGov trains agency personnel to become research-savvy “Pracademics” who lead trials.

Background

Odors are associated with our experiences and can influence our mood, and mood can influence the way we think and behave. Research findings show that unpleasant environment conditions, like high temperatures and bad odors, can lead to aggravated negative behavior. However, people exposed to smells considered pleasant are more likely to act kindly toward others and recall happier memories. Aroma generators emit fragrances that, if perceived positively, can improve mood, potentially bringing about calmness and satisfaction, and reducing misbehaviors.

State Correctional Institution Retreat tested the effectiveness of aromatherapy for improving behavior and satisfaction among its prison residents

Trial Design

Eight residents housed in the Secure Residential Treatment Unit (SRTU) participated in this trial. The SRTU houses a population with both mental and behavioral issue; all are custody level 5 (the highest level) and all have a mental health

diagnoses. Each two-week period in the four-month trial duration was randomly assigned to aromatherapy (intervention) or business-as-usual (control).

Results

Analyses compared the intervention and control conditions over the trial duration for events occurring only on the SRTU. The intervention weeks had 14 total misconducts and one low-level misconduct, compared to 13 and one, respectively in the control weeks. A total of 18 grievances were reported during the intervention weeks compared with 22 in the control weeks. There were no fights or staff assaults, however one resident assault occurred during the intervention week compared to two during the control weeks. Unfortunately, no direct assessment of mood was conducted. Although limited by a small sample size, these results suggest that a larger trial to assess the benefits of aromatherapy would be in order to determine if this would be an easy and practical tool for decreasing misbehaviors.

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