



— BY BONNIE ATWOOD AND SHARON BALDACCI —

Sharon Baldacci and Bonnie Atwood are boomers who experienced a state-of-the-art therapy for age-related dementia. They describe it here as an option for caring for parents and other elderly persons.

Bonnie:

“Snoezelen,” said Kelly Lewis, when showing me around my mother’s day care center. Should I jot down a prescription or say “gesundheit”?

Turns out she was referring to something altogether different — a multisensory environment, to bring out the best in people with mental disabilities, including dementia. Lewis, who was trained in this, set up a room for the Snoezelen experience at Circle Center Adult Day Services.

“Snoezelen” is a made-up word, combining two Dutch verbs: *snuffelen* (to seek out) and *doezelen* (to relax). The concept was developed in the 1970s by therapists who discovered that they could put a challenged client in a room filled with sights, sounds, textures and aromas, and he would show a positive response.

I told Sharon about it. We had to try it. We are both writers, united by our interest in books, caregiving and medical research. Sharon’s book, *A Sundog Moment: A Novel of Hope*, tells how chronic illness changes family dynamics and relationships.

We called Circle Center, which is in Henrico County. Its participants are elderly people living at home. During the day, trained staff cares for them. Circle Center

started in 1976 as a project of Fan District churches and is licensed by the Virginia Department of Social Services.

Sharon:

We peeked into the dimmed room, at a big massage chair, thick-looking blankets, a glass tube lit up and bubbling around what looked like fish, slide projectors and mirrors. The room was filled with delightful scents. The sound system played “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree.” I got comfortable in one of the chairs with a weighted blanket over me.

I was curious. A multisensory environment was intriguing. Since the age of 24, I have been developing a central nervous system illness, multiple sclerosis. The heavy covering had a smooth cushioned surface, and I could feel its texture under numb hands.

The music changed and flowed along with shifting pastel lights. A small jab started pulsing through the chair, to stimulate nerves in the skin. It wasn’t unpleasant, just integrating and blending more senses together. It was restful and stimulating at the same time. All the senses were touched in a swirl of color and music and sensations.

Bonnie:

I couldn’t help thinking about the psychedelic ’60s with this delightful, whimsical sensory experience. My mother was animated when she came out of the Snoezelen room. She said she saw stars (projected on

Multisensory experience
can help with dementia

Snoezelen

the wall of the darkened room), which turned to roses. She said they were “big and lifelike — with all those beautiful, spectacular flowers.”

Spectacular? She’s 100 years old. I can’t remember the last time she used the word “spectacular.” She added, “It made me feel good, very good.”

There is science to back this up. Snoezelen has been used to treat conditions as varied as autism and post-traumatic stress disorder. The philosophy can be traced back to Tibetan monks and, believe it or not, has been compared with the Walmart shopping experience: You are surrounded by symbols of happiness.

The Circle Center already has seen examples of increased appetites among some patients. That apparently is not uncommon. One success story from the Bryan Center in North Carolina: One resident who suffered from Alzheimer’s was losing weight because of distractions in the dining room. He started eating in the Snoezelen room and increased his food intake. He gained more than two and a half pounds in the first month. **B**

Bonnie Atwood is a Richmond-based freelance writer. Sharon Baldacci, sister of novelist David Baldacci, is also a novelist.

For more information about Snoezelen, contact Kelly Lewis at Circle Center Adult Day Services:
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