

TH Activity Plan – Foot & Hand “Bath” with Fresh Herbs

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Photo by European Tissue Symposium



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will experience a fresh herb foot & hand “bath” using washcloths.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Develop strategies for coping with physical/cognitive side effects of chemo, surgery, aging

Physical: Identify & address symptoms of sadness, depression

Psychological/Emotional: Practice emotional response to sensory engagement; demonstrate willingness to try new things; express emotions

Sensory: Demonstrate decreased auditory defensiveness by decreasing verbal outburst during session

Social: Improve communication skills

Materials

plant material: rosemary leaves, lemon balm leaves, lavender flowers

fresh herbs: 6 tablespoons of each herb (herbs can be used singly or mixed)

dried herbs: 3 tablespoons of each herb

1 crock pot (to do herbs separately, more crock pots will be needed)

add water in the crock pot to make enough infusion for everyone to participate
3 small towels or washcloths per person

clean, warm water for washing up afterward
disposable gloves for facilitator

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Prep:** Facilitator turns on crock pot low, 30 minutes prior to session, placing it a location out of reach of participants. Harvest herbs to be used prior to session.
2. Facilitator beings when participants arrive, placing fresh herbs on table, taking time for everyone to observe & smell the leaves, flowers & full plant in pot if available.
3. Facilitator adds herbs to the crock pot (filled with water), stirring mixture after 5-10 min. Add more herbs for stronger scent.
4. Participants will do same process for both hand & foot “bath”. Sitting in a chair, relaxed, the washcloths are dipped & wrung out of the herbal infusion (damp not dripping & not too hot). Participants rub washcloth over hands, leaving cloth on top of hands for several minutes while opening & closing hands. Remove washcloths & dry hands. Each person keeps their drying cloth.
5. Same process for foot “bath”. Participants rub fresh washcloth over their feet, feeling the warmth, smelling the aroma, relaxing with the sensory experience. Remove washcloths & use drying cloth for feet.
6. Group discusses sensations during activity, mood before & after, impact of scent on mood & state of relaxation, & possibility of them doing this on their own at home.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This sensory activity is appropriate for most populations. The Japanese cultural tradition of O-shibori, a wet hand towel to cleanse in the absence of running water is an interesting way to introduce this activity, providing some cultural inclusion & historical facts in the session (Yabai, 2018).

Most individuals will be able to handle washcloths & wash their own hands & feet. Where help is required, previous planning should have occurred with volunteers, parents, care partners or staff assisting people with physical disabilities, cognitive deficits limiting this type of personal grooming (see safety notes below). Participants should be given the option of participating in all or some of the activity. One social goal - improving communication – can be implemented having participants tell facilitator or helper their willingness to try activity, their preferences (just hands, not feet “bath”), & expressing emotions enjoying or disliking sensory experiences. The goal of demonstrating decreased auditory defensiveness by decreasing verbal outburst during session is related to communication skills, self-regulation & sensory processing & may be a goal for the same individuals, providing correlations across multiple health domains. The facilitator should communicate to the group at the beginning of the session that they do not have to participate in both hand & foot “baths” & that their reasons for withdrawing from full participation do not need to be explained in front of group members.

People with sensory processing challenges or physical disabilities may be sensitive to tactile experiences, removal of shoes & socks, feet on floor surfaces, warmth of washcloths. Seniors may feel the need to urinate when warm sensations are introduced or touched.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Constant safety awareness of proximity to hot crockpot by participants, and temperature of washcloths needs to be the responsibility of the facilitator throughout the session. Care should be taken when handling washcloths & towels to deter spread of germs. It is recommended that washcloth sized towels, one for each person be used instead of communally shared towels.

Safeguards need to be in place where physical contact may occur, these including staff or volunteers assisting participants to “bathe” their feet or hands. One safeguard would be that only family members assist minors & people with physical or mental disabilities.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: This activity can be used to identify & address symptoms of sadness, depression or moodiness & presented as a strategy for coping with these. Of course, the symptoms & underlying reasons for these feelings &/or physiology are complex & a warm foot or hand “bath” will not fully treat such health issues. However, such activities, particularly where scent is involved, may be able to distract, shift mood, introduce ideas & strategies that can provide some relief, insights or reduced cravings related to such behaviors (Kilonzi et al., 2019, Fleming, 2022). Research studies on autonomic nervous system responses to warm towels used in clinical, therapeutic health interventions are investigating benefits including relaxation, comfort, hygiene, skin hydration, higher skin temperatures (important for some patients) & thermal stimulus transmitted to the spinal cord, medulla oblongata, midbrain & cerebral cortex (Shishido et al., 2020). These can inform practitioners.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.