

A safety valve to relieve restlessness amongst dementia patients

Twiddle muffs

Typical symptoms in dementia patients are restlessness and constant wandering around. Even their hands never cease moving. One way of channelling this restlessness is represented by twiddle muffs or sensory articles.

People who suffer from dementia or Alzheimer's are restless and their hands never stop moving. They knead their hands, endlessly button and unbutton their jackets, fiddle with a handkerchief or the edge of their sleeves, pick at threads, constantly smooth down tablecloths or - what is worse - start picking at their own skin, with the consequent risk of harming themselves.

One interesting way of keeping patients with those restless hands occupied is a "twiddle muff", first brought to my attention by my colleague [Heather McCrae](#), a German to English technical translator, just a few weeks ago.

The term "twiddle" is an English word and generally means the action of fingers idly plucking, twirling and playing with objects - similar to the verb "fiddle". As far as I know, a German term for twiddle muffs does not yet exist.

So, what are twiddle muffs and twiddle blankets?

A muff, blanket or cushion – it generally makes no difference what the object is – as long as it comes with numerous bits and bobs that attract the attention of a patient and invite them to play with it. Such objects of attraction could be a little buttoned bag that they can open and close, different haptic experiences arising from a combination of smooth patterns and textiles with a profiled pattern (such as a crocheted crocodile pattern). These can be alternated with various types of yarn: wool, cotton, pompom wool, mohair, ribbon yarn, eyelash yarn – the list is almost infinite.

It is almost impossible for dementia patients to learn new things, but familiar things can be practised and retained. These sensory articles provide restless hands with alternatives, enabling them to experience familiar actions and keep their twitchy fingers busy. They can even provide gentle muscle training (for example, by attaching things like hair bands or zips that can be pulled on). Senses can also be activated by incorporating objects like the little bells you can find on chocolate Easter bunnies, lavender bags or even sprigs of rosemary. And, last but not least, hands that are often cold are kept warm.

As this wonderful idea originates from the USA and Great Britain, there are lots of English-language instructions and videos on YouTube and the Internet. I have written a **German**

instruction sheet for everyone who would like to have a go at making such a "twiddle" thing:
[Twiddle-Muff / Hapti-Muff / Sensorik-Muff stricken oder häkeln.](#)

Through my contacts with care homes in Karlsruhe, Mannheim, Schwetzingen and Heidelberg, I discovered that such sensory articles are very popular with patients and are enthusiastically welcomed and used by the personnel. However, the costs, even for very basic versions, are very high as each patient wants their very own "twiddle" thing. Lots of women around the world are creating such items and donating them to care homes – so why not do it here in Germany as well? If you love creating things, have a go – it is easy, enjoyable, awakens your creativity and it is for a good cause. But watch out: You will get addicted and constantly have new ideas. Here are a few of my ideas:

Attach a little bag so that patients can carry a photo of a dear one around at all times.

Use a piece of Velcro to stimulate their hearing.

Incorporate old keys, key rings, nuts and washers, etc. for male patients.

You can also sew such twiddle articles, using materials like inexpensive fleece blankets. You can make around 8 to 10 muffs from one blanket (with the material doubled up). Then just sew on remnants of various types of materials, add buttons and other twiddly bits – all done! If there is a furrier nearby, you can even get hold of scraps of fur for nothing, another way of providing patients with something soft to stroke. Dressmaking shops are also often happy to provide remnants.

If you want to know more about Alzheimer's and dementia, including scientific research on this topic, you can read more [here](#).