

WHAT IS SENSORY DEPRIVATION

Sensory deprivation is a frequently used torture method and may imply restricting the victim's use of the senses of hearing, seeing, smelling, touching, and tasting. Sensory deprivation may also be obtained through reducing auditory, visual, olfactory, tactile, or gustatory stimuli (1,2).

The UN Committee against Torture considers that sensory deprivation, for example by using blindfolds raises concerns of torture and ill-treatment (3). The European Court of Human Rights considered complete sensory isolation, coupled with total social isolation as constituting a form of inhuman and degrading treatment (4,5).

IN PRACTICE

Deprivation of hearing can be obtained by obligatory wearing of earphones with either white noise or sound block (6,7). Deprivation of vision can be achieved with the use of blanked-out goggles or masks (8) or by poor lighting (9). Blindfolding was experienced by more than 50% of refugees from Bangladesh, Iran, Syria, and Turkey, who were all registered in a center for trauma victims in Stockholm (10).

Another method of deprivation of vision is hooding, where the victim's head is covered, but the practice can vary in terms of the material composition of the hood, duration and frequency of use and tightness of the hood around the head (11). Limiting tactile stimuli can be achieved by enclosure in small cells and lack of personal possessions (9) and by constraint of the limbs or attachment of the forearms, so the victim cannot use the hands to touch the surroundings (7).

Limitation of taste can happen by serving an unvaried diet (12), for example nutraloaf (a baked brick-like loaf consisting of mashed-together ingredients that meets the nutritional guidelines) served in some United States prisons (13,14).

Different types of sensory deprivation can take place simultaneously (15), for example, hooding can also impair hearing, respiration, and the sense of smell (11).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Depending on duration sensory deprivation can have both physical and psychological health effects (6). Studies have shown that victims of sensory deprivation can experience auditory and visual hallucinations, perceptual distortions, and sensory imagery (9,16,17).

Sensory deprivation in the form of hooding is also found to cause fear, anxiety, panic attacks, elevated levels of stress and disorientation of time and space (2,11,15,18). Hooding can have negative effects on balance and coordination because of deprivation of vision. Hooding can prevent observation of the detainee's physical condition and prevent the victim's anticipation of harm and defensive response to e.g., kicks and punches increasing the victim's likelihood of severe physical pain, injury, and disability (11).

Sensory deprivation can also lead to concentration problems and impaired memory, distressing mood states and easier change of opinion (19,20,8). Furthermore, sensory deprivation can increase victims' suggestibility, e.g., the victims can start to take the views and opinions of their torturer (21). Sensory deprivation can create a feeling of helplessness in the victims with the aim of demoralizing them and making them more easy to influence (22).

CONCLUSION

Sensory deprivation is the removal of sensory stimulation. Different forms of sensory deprivation can occur simultaneously depriving the person of multiple senses. Sensory deprivation for prolonged periods can have both psychological and physiological consequences including injuries, hallucinations, anxiety, panic attacks, disorientation, concentration problems and impaired memory. It is shown that sensory deprivation is a method to increase victims' suggestibility.

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