

Source

Introduction

The transition into a residential care facility is often associated with declines in psychological wellbeing, alertness, and physical health among older adults. One proposed explanation for these declines is that the institutional environment removes opportunities for residents to make their own decisions, reducing their sense of personal control.

The researchers in this study tested whether deliberately increasing residents' choice and personal responsibility within a nursing home would lead to measurable improvements in self-rated happiness, nurse-rated happiness, activity levels, and participation in optional events. The researchers hypothesized that residents in a condition designed to enhance perceived control would show greater wellbeing after three weeks than residents in a condition in which staff continued to make decisions on their behalf.

Participants

91 residents of a nursing home in Connecticut, ranging in age from 65 to 90 years (mean age = 78), participated in the study. Residents were drawn from two adjacent floors of the same facility. The two floors were comparable in physical layout, level of staffing, and the average physical health of residents at baseline. 47 residents on one floor were assigned to the responsibility-induced group, and 44 residents on the other floor were assigned to the comparison group. Residents who were severely cognitively impaired or who were not able to understand the consent procedure were not enrolled. Most residents were reported to be White and female; complete race/ethnicity data were not reported.

Method

The administrator of the nursing home delivered one of two short talks to the residents on each floor. Residents in the responsibility-induced group were told that they had a number of choices about how their rooms were arranged, how they spent their free time, what activities they wanted to participate in, and whether they would like to accept a houseplant to look after in their room. They were reminded that decisions about their daily lives were largely up to them. Residents in the comparison group were told that the staff cared about them and wanted them to be happy, that the staff would arrange their rooms in a comfortable way, and that the staff would plan activities for them. They were given a houseplant that the nursing staff would water and look after.

Three weeks before the administrator's talk and three weeks after, nurses who were blind to group assignment rated each resident on a 7-point scale (1 = very unhappy, 7 = very happy) for general happiness and on additional scales for alertness and sociability. Nurses also recorded the amount of time each resident spent in active behaviors (visiting other residents, talking to staff, watching staff interact, attending events) rather than passively sitting in their rooms. Independent observers also recorded attendance at an optional movie night that was held on

each floor and participation in a jelly-bean-guessing contest held at the end of the three-week period.

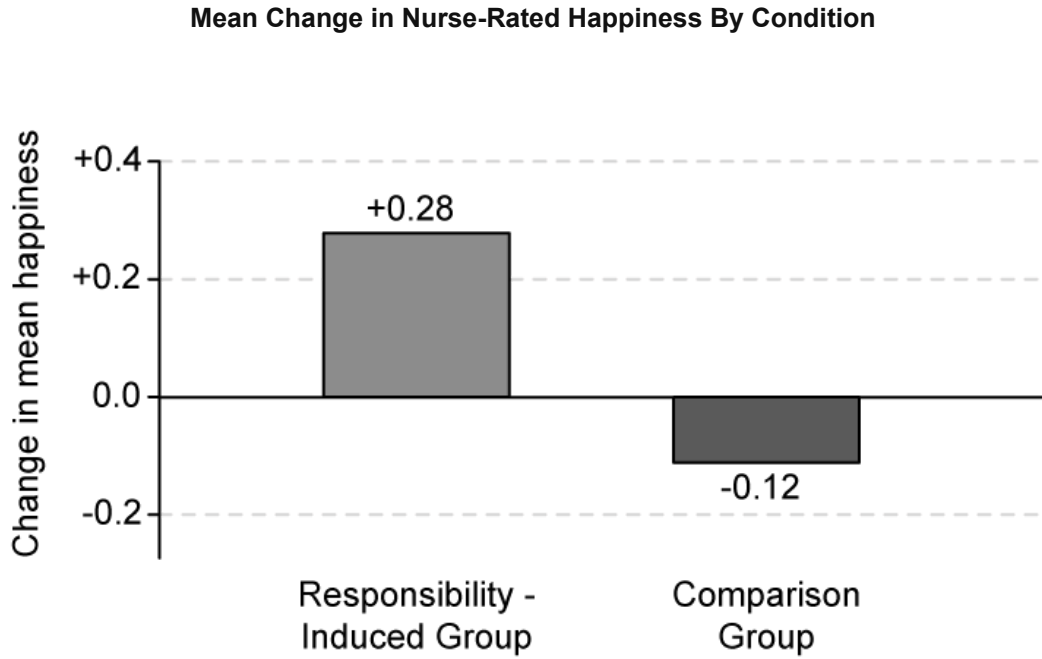
Results and Discussion

Nurse-rated happiness increased by an average of 0.28 points on the 7-point scale for residents in the responsibility-induced group and decreased by an average of 0.12 points for residents in the comparison group. Residents in the responsibility-induced group also spent more time in active behaviours and were more than twice as likely to attend the optional movie night.

18 months later, a follow-up study reported that residents in the responsibility-induced group remained more active and showed lower mortality than residents in the comparison group. The researchers concluded that even modest increases in perceived control over routine daily life can produce measurable and lasting improvements in the psychological wellbeing and behavior of older adults living in institutional settings.

Change in Mean Nurse-Rated Happiness and Activity Measures Over the 3-Week Period

Measure	Responsibility-Induced Group (n = 47)	Comparison Group (n = 44)
Change in mean nurse-rated happiness (7-point scale)	+0.28	-0.12
Mean time in active behaviors (minutes/day)	64	46
Attendance at optional movie night (%)	47%	21%



Langer, E. J., & Rodin, J. (1976). The effects of choice and enhanced personal responsibility for the aged: A field experiment in an institutional setting. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34(2), 191–198.