

Common Behaviors with Dementia



Behavior is a form of communication.

It can be common for people living with dementia to show changes in behavior. Certain behaviors may be an attempt to express discomfort, emotional distress, or pain for one reason or another.

Look for early signs or causes of the behavior (called a trigger). By identifying the trigger, you can address the behavior before it escalates.

Try not to ignore the problem. Doing nothing can make things worse.

Common Causes or Triggers

- Pain, depression, fear, or stress
- Unmet needs – such as hunger or thirst
- Too little rest or sleep
- Constipation
- Soiled underwear or briefs
- Sudden change in a well-known place, routine, or person
- Boredom
- Interaction of medicines
- Urinary tract infection
- A feeling of loss – such as the person may miss the freedom to drive or the company of their deceased spouse
- Too much noise/confusion or too many people in the room
- Being pushed by others to do something, such as bathe or to remember events or people
- Feeling lonely and not having enough contact with other people

Common Behaviors

- **Agitation:** Pacing the room, fidgeting, easily upset, yelling
- **Aggression:** Verbal arguments, threatening others, physically harming oneself or others
- **Hallucination:** Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or feeling something that isn't there
- **Delusion:** Believing something to be true, when it is not
- **Paranoia:** Believing others are stealing or lying to them, claiming others are “out to get me”
- **Rummaging or hiding items:** Searching for misplaced items, hoarding objects for “safe keeping,” sorting through items, placing items in other locations
- **Sundowning:** Late afternoon or early evening restlessness, irritability, or confusion
- **Refusal to complete a task:** Declining to perform personal hygiene, eat, take medications

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Tips for Responding to Behaviors

- Use the communication strategies to validate the emotions behind what the person is saying, even if it is fantasy
- Use humor when you can to make the activity as pleasant and comfortable as possible
- Allow the person to keep as much control in their life as possible, helping with the task but not doing it for them or to them
- Create a daily routine so the person knows when certain things will happen
- Build quiet times into the day, along with activities
- Keep familiar objects and photographs nearby to help the person feel more secure
- Play soothing music, read a good book or take a nice stroll
- Reassure the person that they are safe and you are there to help
- Reduce noise, clutter, or the number of people in the room
- Limit the amount of caffeine, sugar, and “junk food” the person drinks and eats
- Search the house to learn where the person might hide things
- Turn on lights and close the curtains or blinds before dusk to minimize shadows
- Ask the doctor if medicine is needed to reduce or prevent agitation or aggression
- Find reasons to compliment the person on who they are, what they contribute and what skill set they still have

Managing Behaviors

Talk with the person's doctor if you notice sudden changes in behavior. Infections can be common and can cause psychiatric symptoms or aggressive behaviors. A thorough medical examination can identify what else could be causing the unusual symptoms. Medications are available, however, environmental changes should be attempted first before using medications to treat some behavioral symptoms. If the person is aggressive, protect yourself and others. If you have to, stay at a safe distance from the person until the behavior stops or call 9-1-1. Give us a call, our team of social workers are available to talk through any situation or questions you may have.

Teepa Snow, Challenging Behaviors
Teepa Snow, Managing Challenging Situations
UCLA Alzheimer's & Dementia Care Program
Family Caregiver Alliance

www.teepasnow.com/resources/teepa-tips-videos
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp8HLExUce8
www.dementia.uclahealth.org
www.caregiver.org/fca-videos