

Managing Challenging Behaviors

A person with dementia may exhibit challenging behaviors for many reasons. Being sensitive to the emotion behind the behavior can help to manage stress and frustration.

Potential Causes of Problem Behaviors:

Inability to Meet Basic Needs: Hunger, dehydration, elimination problems and fatigue can produce behavioral changes. The person with dementia may show discomfort through agitated and aggressive behavior.

Reaction to Loss: We all rely on information from the environment to guide us in activities and relationships. An individual with dementia has difficulty processing information and communicating needs. This may cause fear, insecurity and frustration.

Medical Problems: Pain and discomfort from a medical problem or medication side effects can go unnoticed because of the individual's inability to report it.

Environmental Factors:

- ◆ Excessive noise
- ◆ Poor or glaring lighting
- ◆ Uncomfortable temperatures (hot or cold)
- ◆ Change in the environment/routines
- ◆ Boredom and conflicts

Sensory Impairment: Individuals with hearing and/or visual impairments tend to be more paranoid, hallucinate more, and feel more frightened and frustrated.

Factors Related to the Caregiver: A caregiver's approach and knowledge of dementia affect the care of individuals with the disease. The more caregivers know about dementia, the more likely they will be able to understand behavior changes.

Coping with Wandering:

- ◆ Do not leave the person with dementia home alone even just for a few minutes.
- ◆ Monitor and record wandering patterns.
- ◆ Consult with a physician to see if medications can help.
- ◆ Provide activities — for example, music, physical exercise or movies — to reduce boredom.
- ◆ Ensure that the individual is well fed, well hydrated and using the bathroom at regular intervals.
- ◆ Reduce environmental stimuli like loud noise or overcrowding.
- ◆ Outfit the individual with an identification bracelet, and put some form of identification in every jacket or pocketbook.
- ◆ Have a current photo readily available and find out about leaving one on file at the police department.
- ◆ Add electronic chimes or doorbells so a caregiver is alerted if the individual is leaving.
- ◆ Identify rooms with colorful signs.
- ◆ Post a large sign that says "STOP" or "DO NOT ENTER" on exits.
- ◆ Mask exit doors with a curtain.
- ◆ Place a large black mat or paint a black space by an exit, which may look like an impassable hole to the person with Alzheimer's disease.
- ◆ Put away items that trigger thoughts of leaving, such as coats, shoes, and pocketbooks.
- ◆ Tell neighbors about wandering behavior and make sure they have your phone number.

Try not to take it personally — it's the disease, not the person!

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Coping with Agitation and Aggression:

- ◆ Seek a doctor's advice to determine if there is a medical cause or if medications are causing adverse side effects.
- ◆ Limit outside noise, clutter or the number of persons in a room.
- ◆ Keep to familiar routines.
- ◆ Reduce caffeine intake.
- ◆ Do not move objects and furniture.
- ◆ Dot the environment with familiar objects that promote pleasant memories.
- ◆ Try gentle touch, soothing music, reading or walks.
- ◆ Speak in a reassuring voice.
- ◆ Distract the person with a snack or activity.
- ◆ Learn to recognize behaviors — an agitated state or pulling at clothing, for example, could indicate a need to use the bathroom.
- ◆ Do not try to restrain the person during an agitated reaction.
- ◆ Keep dangerous objects out of reach.
- ◆ If agitation increases at night, a nightlight may reduce confusion.

Coping with Paranoia:

- ◆ Discuss paranoid behaviors with the individual's doctor. Medications may need to be adjusted.
- ◆ Explain to family members and caregivers that suspicious accusations are a part of the illness.
- ◆ Respond to the feeling behind the accusation.
- ◆ Try non-verbal reassurances like a gentle touch or hug.
- ◆ If the individual suspects money is "missing," allow them to keep small amounts of money in a pocket or pocketbook.
- ◆ Help to look for a missing object. Try to learn where their favorite hiding places are for storing objects that are "lost".
- ◆ Avoid arguing. The person's reality is very real for them.
- ◆ Keep individuals awake during the day.
- ◆ Increase indoor lighting before dusk.
- ◆ Ensure that the individual is not suffering from hunger, thirst, pain or fear.
- ◆ Remove excess stimuli and clutter.
- ◆ Consult your doctor to see if medications may help.

Sundowning:

Sundowning is a dementia-related symptom that refers to increased agitation, confusion and hyperactivity that typically begins in the late afternoon and builds throughout the evening. To combat sundowning, increase indoor lighting before dusk, plan activities or outings in the morning, and remove excess stimuli and clutter as the day winds down. Consult your physician if sundowning continues to be an issue.

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