

Common Behaviors with Dementia

It can be common for people living with dementia to show changes in behavior. They are often a form of communication and may be an attempt to express discomfort 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.

Some 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 or 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

Tips for Responding to Behaviors

- Practice compassionate communication* by validating the feelings behind what the person is saying, even if it is fantasy
- Use humor when you can to make the activity as pleasant and comfortable

- Allow the person to keep as much control in his or her life as possible, helping the person to complete 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 he or she is 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

Managing Behaviors

Talk with the person’s doctor if you notice these behavior changes. Infections can be common and can cause psychiatric symptoms or aggressive behaviors. If left untreated, one’s health may be at great risk. A doctor can perform a medical exam to find any problems that may be causing a sudden change in behavior. Medications are available to treat some behavioral symptoms. It is important to note that there are many environmental changes that should be attempted first before using medications to manage behavioral symptoms. People with Alzheimer’s disease will likely need help in taking any medications.

When the person is aggressive, protect yourself and others. If you have to, stay at a safe distance from the person until the behavior stops. Also try to protect the person from hurting himself or herself*.

Helpful videos on this topic:

Teepa Snow, Challenging Behaviors

www.teepasnow.com/resources/teepa-tips-videos

Teepa Snow, Managing Challenging Situations

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp8HLExUce8

UCLA Alzheimer’s and Dementia Care Program

www.dementia.uclahealth.org

Family Caregiver Alliance

www.caregiver.org/fca-videos

*For more information on Compassionate Communication Strategies and Home Safety, please contact Alzheimer’s San Diego.