

Behaviors



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What causes dementia-related behavior like aggression, and how to respond.

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias can cause a person to act in different and unpredictable ways. Some individuals with Alzheimer's become anxious or aggressive. Others repeat certain questions or gestures. Many misinterpret what they hear. These types of reactions can lead to misunderstanding, frustration and tension, particularly between the person with dementia and the caregiver. It is important to understand that the person is not acting that way on purpose.

Behavior may be related to:

Physical discomfort

Illnesses or medication

Overstimulation

Loud noises or a busy environment

Unfamiliar surroundings

New places or the inability to recognize home

Complicated tasks

Difficulty with activities or chores

Frustrating interactions

Inability to communicate effectively

Use this three-step approach to help identify common behaviors and their causes:

1- Identify and examine the behavior

- What was the behavior? Is it harmful to the individual or others?
- What happened just before the behavior occurred? Did something trigger it?
- What happened immediately after the behavior occurred? How did you react?
- Consult a physician to identify any causes related to medications or illness.

2- Explore potential solutions

- What are the needs of the person with dementia? Are they being met?
- Can adapting the surroundings comfort the person?
- How can you change your reaction or your approach to the behavior? Are you responding in a calm and supportive way?

3- Try different responses

- Did your new response help?
- Do you need to explore other potential causes and solutions?

If so, what can you do differently?

1- AGGRESSION

Aggressive behaviors may be verbal (shouting, name-calling) or physical (hitting, pushing). These behaviors can occur suddenly, with no apparent reason, or can result from a frustrating situation. Whatever the case, it is important to try to understand what is causing the person to become angry or upset.

How to respond:

Try to identify the immediate cause

Think about what happened right before the reaction that may have triggered the behavior.

Focus on feelings, not facts

Try not to concentrate on specific details; rather, consider the person's emotions. Look for the feelings behind the words.

Don't get angry or upset

Be positive and reassuring. Speak slowly in a soft tone.

Limit distractions

Examine the person's surroundings, and adapt them to avoid other similar situations.

Try a relaxing activity

Use music, massage or exercise to help soothe the person.

Shift the focus to another activity

The immediate situation or activity may have unintentionally caused the aggressive response. Try something different.

2- ANXIETY OR AGITATION

A person with Alzheimer's may feel anxious or agitated. He or she may become restless and need to move around or pace. Or the person may become upset in certain places or focused on specific details. He or she may also become over-reliant on a certain caregiver for attention and direction.

How to respond:

Listen to the frustration

Find out what may be causing the anxiety, and try to understand.

Provide reassurance

Use calming phrases. Let the individual know you're there for him or her.

Involve the person in activities

Try using art, music or other activities to help the person relax.

Modify the environment

Decrease noise and distractions, or move to another place.

Find outlets for the person's energy

He or she may be looking for something to do. Take a walk, or go for a car ride.

3- CONFUSION

The person with Alzheimer's may not recognize familiar people, places or things. He or she may forget relationships, call family members by other names or become confused about where home is. The person may also forget the purpose of common items, such as a pen or fork. These situations are extremely difficult for caregivers and require much patience and understanding.

How to respond:

Stay calm

Although being called by a different name or not being recognized can be painful, try not to make your hurt apparent.

Respond with a brief explanation

Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy statements and reasons. Instead, clarify with a simple explanation.

Show photos and other reminders

Use photographs and other thought-provoking items to remind the person of important relationships and places.

Offer corrections as suggestions

Avoid explanations that sound like scolding. Try "I thought it was a fork," or "I think he is your grandson Peter."

Try not to take it personally

Remember, Alzheimer's causes your loved one to forget, but your support and understanding will continue to be appreciated.

4- REPETITION

A person with Alzheimer's may do or say something over and over again – like repeating a word, question or activity. In most cases, he or she is probably looking for comfort, security and familiarity. The person may also pace or undo what has just been finished. These actions are rarely harmful to the person with Alzheimer's but can be stressful for the caregiver.

How to respond:

Look for a reason behind the repetition

Try to find out if there is a specific cause for the behavior.

Focus on the emotion, not the behavior

Rather than reacting to what the person is doing, think about how he or she is feeling.

Turn the action or behavior into an activity

If the person is rubbing his or her hand across the table, provide a cloth and ask for help with dusting.

Stay calm, and be patient

Reassure the person with a calm voice and gentle touch.

Provide an answer

Give the person the answer that he or she is looking for, even if you have to repeat it several times.

5- SUSPICION

Memory loss and confusion may cause the person with Alzheimer's to perceive things in new, unusual ways. Individuals may become suspicious of those around them, even accusing others of theft, infidelity or other improper behavior. Sometimes the person may also misinterpret what he or she sees and hears.

How to respond:

Don't take offense

Listen to what is troubling the person, and try to understand that reality. Then be reassuring, and let the person know you care.

Don't argue or try to convince

Allow the individual to express ideas. Acknowledge his or her opinions.

Offer a simple answer

Share your thoughts with the individual, but keep it simple. Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy explanations or reasons.

Switch the focus to another activity

Engage the individual in an activity, or ask for help with a chore.

Duplicate any lost items

If the person is often searching for a specific item, have several available. For example, if the individual is always looking for his or her wallet, purchase two of the same kind.

10 quick tips responding to behaviors

1. Remain flexible, patient and calm
2. Respond to the emotion, not the behavior
3. Don't argue or try to convince
4. Use memory aids
5. Acknowledge requests, and respond to them
6. Look for the reasons behind each behavior
7. Consult a physician to identify any causes related to medications or illness
8. Explore various solutions
9. Don't take the behavior personally
10. Share your experiences with others