

Techniques to Help with Challenging Behaviors

Understanding and Responding

Dementia affects the brain in ways that cause a person to act differently than in the past.

Remember: he is not acting this way intentionally!

Remember: challenging behavior may be his only way to express himself at the moment

Remember: it's up to caregivers with their good brains to figure out what he's trying to express

Ask Yourself:

- What happened?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- How did it happen?
- Why did it happen?

Challenging behaviors may be triggered by:

- Physical problems: pain, discomfort, fatigue, illness, medication, or other medical issue.
- Environment problems: loud noises; too much or too little stimulation; change in daily routine or activities; feeling lost: not recognizing where one is or what one is supposed to be doing.
- Task problems: activities or chores that are too complicated or not sufficiently engaging
- Communication problems: frustration caused by inability to follow and participate in conversations or to communicate thoughts, feelings, opinions and questions effectively.
- Unmet needs or worries: emotional, spiritual, psychological, financial, etc.
- Perceived (or misperceived) threats, offended dignity and pride

Think of ways to solve the problem:

- Are the needs of the person being met? [Note: If the change is sudden, it may be a medical problem. Check with the doctor.]
- Can changing the surroundings stop the difficult behavior?
- Can you adjust the activity or environment?
- How can you change how you react? Are you responding in a calm and helpful way?

Try to do things differently the next time:

- Did your new response help?

- Do you need to look at other potential causes and ways to cope?
- Communicate with other caregivers.
- Make sure care plan is up-to-date.

General tips to help with difficult times

- Stay calm and be understanding.
- Be patient and flexible.
- Look for reasons for each difficult behavior.
- Respond to the emotion (such as fear or loneliness), not the action.
- Confusion causes fear, which may make the person with dementia want to “fight or flee”. If you prevent the fear and provide comfort, this can reduce problems.
- **Do not argue or try to convince.**
- Let the person know that you have heard and understand his concerns and requests, then respond to them.
- Accept the actions as part of the disease and try to work through them.
- Try many different solutions, if needed.
- Find other things the person can do when he is having difficulty.
- Use memory aids or objects (like pictures or food) to distract the person.
- Don’t take the behaviors personally, even if they feel personal.
- Find time for yourself to help avoid burnout.

Remember:

Since there are many caregivers, talk with one another about the way the person is acting to make sure you are each handling issues the same way. Consistency and routine are important when caring for someone with dementia. If these behaviors become more difficult, discuss them with the person’s doctor.

Specific changes in behavior & how you can help

Aggressive behaviors

Aggressive behaviors may include shouting, name-calling, hitting or pushing. They can happen suddenly for unclear reasons. It is important to try to understand what is causing the person to become angry or upset. For example, a sudden noise, the appearance of a particular person, or a need to use the bathroom can trigger a change in behavior.

How you can help

- What happened that made the person react in this way? What was the trigger?
- Think about the way the person feels, rather than the act.
- Try to eliminate the trigger.
- If the trigger is a particular person, try to limit their exposure to each other.
- Do not get angry and upset. Be positive and reassuring.
- Use distraction to diffuse the situation—offer snack, walk, look at photos or newspaper, music, favorite video or TV show
- If you feel threatened, walk away if at all safe to do so.

Suspicious thoughts

Due to memory loss and confusion, the person with Alzheimer's disease or other dementia may frequently misunderstand what is seen and heard. This may result in suspicion of others and even accusations of theft, cheating or other improper acts.

How you can help

- Listen patiently to the person's concerns and try to understand. It's important that the person feels that you understand and care.
- Do not argue or try to use reason or logic.
- Apologize as needed: "I'm sorry, I thought I told you." "I'm sorry if I upset you."
- Offer a simple answer.
- After you've acknowledged the person's concerns and attempted to deal with them; use distraction; switch the person's attention to another activity.
- Find or replace lost items. If something specific is frequently misplaced, have several around. For example, have two empty wallets/purses.
- Try to avoid the appearance of wronging the person. Work to maintain trust. Don't carry on whispered conversations in the person's presence. Be careful removing items from his room that might be missed. Always treat the person with dignity, honor and respect.

Delusions

Delusions are false beliefs; having suspicious thoughts is one type of delusion. Other common delusions are that the spouse is not the spouse, that the spouse is having an affair, or that some terrible calamity is imminent. These thoughts are due to damage to the brain tissue, and are often based on something that has happened, either recently or in the past, that the person is not longer able to figure out logically.

How you can help

- Listen with empathy—these thoughts are real to the person
- Avoid arguing or trying to use logic—it won't work
- Try to change the subject or engage person in pleasant activity
- Avoid asking more questions about the false belief (such as "what happened next," etc.)

Hallucinations

Hallucinations are sensory experiences that are real to the person experiencing them, but others do not experience. Hearing voices or seeing things are the most common, but some people smell, taste or feel things that aren't there. Hallucinations are a symptom that can be caused by many things that affect the brain, including MANY medications, alcohol, street drugs, infections, and diseases. In dementia, they can be due to the brain damage that is part of the disease, but if they suddenly appear, they are due to something else such as a medication or illness. Visual hallucinations are the most common type in dementia.

How you can help

- Remember that the experience is very real to the person and try to imagine what that must be like
- You can gently say that you don't see or hear what they do, and ask if they are upset
- Try saying, "I don't see the kitten on the windowsill; is it frightening you?"
- If you can figure out that what they are seeing or hearing is simply something else (like a reflection in the window), you can point this out and try to remove it (for example, by closing the curtains)
- Try to change the subject or engage person in pleasant activity

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