

Wandering and Exit Seeking

Possible Causes: Changes in the brain from dementia, effects of many medications including alcohol and caffeine, inability to identify or express such things as hunger or need to toilet, inability to shift from one activity to another without help, discomfort from sitting in one place, history of coping with stress by pacing, too warm or too chilly, sensory overload from noisy environment, boredom, poor lighting, feeling lost so looking for someone or something familiar, feeling useless, clothing too tight or uncomfortable, wanting to get away from caregiver's tension or impatience, not enough physical exercise, no ability to get outside for daylight and fresh air; at night unable to separate dreams from reality, not tired enough to sleep well at night

Prevention Strategies

- Thorough medical evaluation, including review of all current medications by prescriber or pharmacist; avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine
- Place familiar objects, photographs, furniture in the area
- Clearly label rooms, especially toilet and bedroom, with large, contrasting letters and pictures
- Paint bathroom doors and/or door frames a bright, contrasting color
- Decrease noise levels
- Re-think use of personal and door alarms as they can signal danger and need to flee
- Schedule daily physical activity--especially outdoor activity, even in chilly weather
- Ambulate people in wheelchairs who can walk with assistance at least once a day, increasing to 3 times a day—Walk to Dine program to sit in regular chair to eat
 - Regular ambulation decreases agitation, risk of injury from falls, risk of painful contractures of hips and knees from constant sitting, risk of pneumonia
- Have safe areas where people can wander outdoors, such as enclosed patio
- When not going outdoors, keep visual triggers such as coat, hat, purse out of sight
- Build in meaningful activities that make the person feel useful
- Use familiar sensory stimulation such as the smell of baking bread or fresh brewed coffee to have a pleasing, calming effect
- Keep televisions off unless watching a specific, G-rated program
 - People with dementia often mistake television programs (including weather forecasts) for events that affect them personally, and respond by becoming anxious, frightened, wanting to flee, or acting out in other ways
- Improve lighting throughout the building, especially during day, to help with alertness and orientation

- Place items in plain sight that you want to encourage the person to use or look at, such as photo albums, magazines, newspapers, watering cans, unfolded laundry
- Keep items that you don't want him/her to have hidden or locked away
- Camouflage exit doors and doors to off-limit areas by painting same color as surrounding wall, or painting to look like bookcase or other furniture
- Use DANGER or DO NOT ENTER signs for off-limit areas
- Make sure the person wears some type of ID bracelet indicating dementia

Coping Strategies when Exit Seeking, Going into Others' Room, or Pacing to Exhaustion

- Redirect wanderers by walking with them for a while
- After a few minutes, offer to sit and share their favorite food, drink, or activity: "Let's go get coffee"
- Match their mood (happy, searching, singing) unless they are angry
- If person is angry, comment on this and offer to help: "You seem upset; can I help?"
- Avoid confronting, arguing, scolding, trying to physically move or block the person
- Consider possible physical causes such as illness, hunger, pain, or need to toilet
- Use positive statements "Come with me" instead of "Don't go there"
- Take the person outside for a walk around the building, then back in for a snack
- Tell the person you're in need of some help and ask if s/he has a minute to help you
 - Invent a task that takes him/her away from the door, such as holding a closet door for you because you have an armload of towels, or listen for the timer on the oven while you run down the hall to get something, etc.
- Ask person to help you with a simple task, such as setting table, sorting items, taking nuts off bolts, folding laundry, etc.

Choose your battles wisely. Don't offer too much redirection or correction in areas that are not dangerous. For example, if a person wanders into an off-limits area such as a storage room, but is not in immediate danger, greet pleasantly and explain what type of room that is, then offer distraction such as food, and lock the door on your way out. Arguing and frequent corrections will lead to negative feelings and agitation, and will make it more difficult to get the person to agree to engage in other activities that you might suggest later.

The person will often follow your example more easily than your verbal directions. Try engaging in activities/chores together and "model" the task, using minimal verbal instruction.

Be aware of how the person's moods and cognitive abilities change throughout the day.

Encourage more active, task-oriented activities at the time of day s/he is usually more alert and interested in being busy. Decrease amount of expected activity when person is tired or fatigued to help reduce mood and behavioral challenges.

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