



Changed Behaviors & Dementia - 08

## AGITATED BEHAVIORS

**This Help Sheet discusses some of the causes of agitated behaviors, which can be a very concerning symptom of dementia and suggests ways to prevent and manage them if they occur.**

### What is agitated behavior?

Changes in the behavior of people with dementia are very common. Sometimes they can become upset and display behaviors such as pacing and fiddling. Constant vocalizations such as talking constantly, repeating words and phrases, crying or cursing and screaming are also types of agitated behaviors. Repetitive questioning, such as being asked continually what day it is, or when dinner will be ready, is another type.

These behaviors can be distressing and a constant annoyance for families and care partners.

Remember they can also be a sign of some distress for the person with dementia, so it is important to be able to understand why these behaviors occur and ways to manage them.

### What causes these behaviors?

There are many reasons why behaviors change. Every person with dementia is an individual who will react to circumstances in their own way. Sometimes the behavior may be related to changes taking place in the brain.

In other instances, there may be events or factors in the environment triggering the behavior. In some situations, a task, such as taking a bath, may be too complex, or the person may not be feeling well.

### Understanding the behaviors

It is important to try to understand why the person with dementia is behaving in a particular way. If family members and care partners can determine what may be triggering the behavior, it may be easier to figure out ways to prevent the behavior happening again.

Some frequent causes of agitated behaviors are:

#### Health factors.

- Fatigue.
- Disruption of sleep patterns causing sleep deprivation.
- Physical discomfort such as pain, fever, illness or constipation.
- Loss of control over behaviors due to the physical changes in the brain.
- Adverse side effects of medication.
- Impaired vision or hearing causing the person to misinterpret sight and sounds.
- Hallucinations.



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**Defensive behaviors** - A person with intimate functions such as bathing, toileting and dressing. They may feel their independence and privacy are being threatened.

**Failure** - Because they are no longer able to cope with everyday demands, a person with dementia may feel pressured.

**Misunderstanding** - No longer understanding what is going on may lead to bewilderment, or the person may become distressed by an awareness of their declining abilities.

**Fear** - They may become frightened because they no longer recognize certain places or people. They may be recalling an earlier life experience that is frightening or uncomfortable to remember.

**Need for some attention** - A person with dementia may be trying to let someone know that they are bored, distressed, have an excess of energy or feel ill.

### What to try

- A medical examination will help identify any physical problems, or unwanted side effects of medications.
- Agitation can be a symptom of depression. If you suspect that depression may be a problem for the person with dementia discuss it with the doctor. It is important to investigate and treat depression where it is suspected.
- Be aware of the warning signs of agitated behavior and try strategies to stop its development.
- Reduce the demands made on the person whilst still enabling them to make worthwhile contributions.
- Ensure that there is an unrushed and consistent routine.
- If possible, address the underlying feeling.
- Spend time explaining what is happening, step by step, in simple sentences. Even if they can't understand your words your calm tone will be reassuring.
- Avoid confrontation. Either distract their attention or suggest an alternative activity.
- Make sure the person gets enough exercise and participates in meaningful activities.
- Make sure they are comfortable.

Despite your best efforts the person may still become agitated. Concentrate instead on handling it as calmly and effectively as possible.

### When agitated behaviors occur:

- Stay calm. Speak in a calm, reassuring voice.
- A simple activity such as having a cup of tea or looking at a magazine together may help. Distraction and understanding the trigger are often the most useful approaches.



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- Use what works for you. Answering repetitive questions works for some. For others, ignoring the question helps. It can be useful to look behind the questions to see whether the person needs some reassurance about something they are unable to express verbally.

Agitated behaviors can be very difficult for families and care partners. The behaviors are symptoms of dementia and are not meant to deliberately upset you. Remember to look after yourself and take regular breaks.

### Who can help?

Discuss with your doctor any concerns about behavior changes, and their impact on you.

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** locally call Dementia Friendly Wyoming 307-461-7134 or visit our website <http://www.dwfsheridan.org> or The Sheridan Senior Center 307-672-2240. Nationally contact the Alzheimer's Association at 1-800-272-3900, or visit their website at <http://www.alz.org>.