



## How to Respond to Dementia Behaviors

A person living with Alzheimer's or another form of dementia may eventually struggle to make sense of the world around them. They may have difficulty distinguishing what is real, what is safe, or what behaviors are appropriate for a given situation. Alzheimer's disease causes changes in the brain that can make a person act in new and sometimes unusual ways. Some may become anxious or aggressive, while others may repeat certain questions or gestures, or misinterpret what they hear.

While dementia-related behaviors can be challenging, it's important to understand that these behaviors are not something the person can control. Rather, they are a form of communication — much like an alarm signaling an unmet need. The person living with dementia may need to feel safe, comfortable, or understood, and these behaviors serve as attempts to express those needs. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to better understand what the person is trying to communicate and how to assist them.

## Triggers and Common Behaviors

Many factors can trigger or increase dementia-related behaviors. These triggers can be physical, social, environmental, or personal:

- **Physical triggers:** Pain, discomfort, or unmet physical needs. For example, the person may be hungry or need to use the bathroom.
- **Social triggers:** Interaction with people who stress or bother the person, such as when a visitor speaks too loudly.
- **Environmental triggers:** Stressors in the person's surroundings, like a room that is too hot or noisy.
- **Personal triggers:** Internal factors such as emotions, thoughts, or activities, like feeling scared about a change in routine.

## **Some Common Dementia-Related Behaviors**

### **1. Anxiety and Agitation**

- A person experiencing anxiety or agitation may appear worried or nervous. They may act short-tempered or have difficulty sitting still. Situations that could lead to anxiety and agitation include:
  - Moving to a new home or nursing facility.
  - Changes in environment (travel, hospitalization, or visitors).
  - New caregiver arrangements.
  - A belief that something is a threat, even when it's not.

### **2. Anger and Aggression**

- Aggressive behavior can be verbal (shouting, name-calling) or physical (hitting, pushing). These behaviors may occur suddenly with no apparent reason or could result from frustration. Possible causes include:
  - Physical discomfort, like pain or hunger.
  - Environmental factors, such as a noisy room.
  - Communication difficulties, where the person may feel frustrated because they cannot understand what's happening.

### **3. Suspicion and Delusions**

- Confusion and memory loss can lead to untrue beliefs. For example, the person may believe that family members are stealing from them. Some situations that can trigger suspicion include:
  - The person discovering their wallet is empty.
  - Forgetting that an item was moved.
  - Possessions being moved during cleaning.

### **4. Wandering**

- It is common for people with dementia to wander or become confused about their location. They may wander on foot, by car, or use public transportation. Six in 10 people living with dementia will wander at least once, and many do so repeatedly. While common, wandering can be dangerous. Reasons for wandering include:
  - Physical pain or restlessness.
  - An unmet need, like hunger.
  - Boredom.

## **Responding to Dementia-Related Behaviors**

While medications can sometimes help with dementia-related behaviors, it's important to try non-medical responses first. These strategies are often more effective, as they focus on addressing the triggers of the behavior and making changes to the person's environment. Non-medical responses center on providing physical and emotional comfort, and they can be especially helpful when trying to understand and meet the needs of a person who may have difficulty communicating with words.

It may be hard at first to identify the cause of dementia-related behaviors, but the following four-step process can help:

### **Step 1: Detect and Connect**

- Approach the person calmly, quietly, and with respect. This allows you to connect with them while assessing the situation.
- Use your knowledge of the person to understand their needs or feelings. For instance, if the person usually sleeps well but was awake all night, they may be telling you through their behavior that they are tired and need rest.
- Join the person in their reality. Even if what they believe is not true, accept it and see the world from their perspective. Avoid correcting them or telling them they are wrong.

### **Consider these questions to identify the need behind the behavior:**

- Who was with the person when the behavior occurred?
- What happened just before or after the behavior began?
- When did the behavior happen (time of day, past occurrences)?
- Where did the behavior happen?
- How did I react?

### **Step 2: Take Care of Physical Needs**

- Understand that a person with dementia may not be able to tell you what they need physically. Check for pain, discomfort, or signs of injury (e.g., from a fall). Consider any medical issues, like a urinary tract infection, constipation, or possible side effects from new medications. Share any new pain or unusual behaviors with the person's doctor.

### **Common causes of physical discomfort include:**

- Uncomfortable clothing (too tight or inappropriate for the weather)
- Lighting issues or glare
- Room temperature that is too hot or cold
- Hunger or thirst
- A need to stretch or move around
- A need to use the toilet
- Excessive noise or activity

### **Step 3: Help with Emotional Needs**

- Focus on the person's emotions rather than the facts of the situation. For example, if they seem afraid, they may be showing it by crying. Respond to the emotion, not the behavior.
- Offer comfort by letting them know they are not alone and that you are trying to make them feel more comfortable.
- Use your knowledge of the person's likes and dislikes to redirect them to an activity that brings them joy. If your initial approach isn't successful, try again later or ask for help from someone else.

### **Step 4: Review and Plan for Next Time**

- After the situation has been addressed, go back to Step 1 and assess whether your actions were effective.
- Reflect on what worked, what didn't, and what you would do differently the next time.

Responding with patience, understanding, and empathy is key to helping those with dementia feel safe and cared for.