

Understanding Behavioral Symptoms of Dementia



All behavior is communication. Because of physical changes in the brain, a person with dementia may no longer have the ability to express their own needs, wants, or feelings. Instead, your loved one may use their behavior to communicate. Some common behavioral symptoms include: wandering, aggression, agitation/anxiety, repetitive questions, confusion, suspicion, trouble sleeping, etc.

What Causes or Triggers Behavior

Since all behavior is a communication, we need to dig deeper into what the person with dementia is trying to communicate. It can be helpful to look at the three main causes or triggers of behavior to discover the underlying communication.

1. The Person with Dementia

- Medical concerns like Urinary Tract Infection (UTI), medication interaction and/or side effects, pain/discomfort, anxiety, other emotions, etc.

2. The Environment

- Poor lighting or darkness, reflections, shadows, too noisy, overwhelming or overstimulating, temperature, boredom, etc.

3. The Caregiver Approach

- Non-verbal cues, caregiver is annoyed, angry, or upset, tries to orient or explain, rushing or hurrying the person, lack of understanding of the disease, etc.

Responses that Might Help

- Try to identify the immediate cause or trigger
- Try not to get upset - stay calm!
- Shift the focus to another activity
- Relax and redirect!
- Focus on the person's feelings and emotions
- Try not to take it personally
- Find outlets for energy
- Provide reassurance and comfort

The Fish Analogy

People with dementia are like fish in a pond. They live in their reality, under the water. We live on land and understand this reality. Pulling fish out of the water (yanking them from their reality) is upsetting and can cause anxiety, worry, agitation, and aggression.

Put the fishing pole away! Jump in the water!

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Tools for Caregivers: Your Approach Matters

Validate

Person with Dementia: "I need to call my daughter. She was supposed to pick me up!"

Caregiver: "Oh, you must be worried."

DO: Begin by validating the feeling and give a word to the emotion.

DON'T: Dismiss the person with dementia.

Why? Validation can reduce stress and agitation. The emotion is more important than the reason behind it.

Apologize

Person with dementia: "Where did you put my wallet?"

Caregiver: "I'm sorry, I must have moved it."

DO: Take responsibility for things even if it wasn't your fault.

DON'T: Turn the blame back on the person with dementia.

Why? An apology is a great way to allow a person to move forward in a conversation.

Redirect

Person with dementia: "I need to go to the bank and get my money out."

Caregiver: "Yes, let's go for a drive this afternoon. Let's eat lunch first."

DO: Respond affirmatively, then offer another activity to do first.

DON'T: Reorient the person and explain that they no longer need to go to the bank.

Why? Redirection or distraction is one of the most effective ways to change the thought process of your loved one with dementia.

Reassure

Person with dementia: "I've lost my purse. I had it right here."

Caregiver: "Don't worry, I'll help you find it."

DO: Ensure the person with dementia feels that help is on the way.

DON'T: Take the opportunity to orient the person with dementia.

Why? Whether a person has dementia or not, statements of reassurance are naturally calming.

Don't Reorient

Person with dementia: "I want to go home. This is not my home."

Caregiver: "You grew up on a farm, right?"

DO: Identify their request as an attempt to connect and communicate an anxiety emotion.

DON'T: Try and convince them they are "home" and reorient them.

Why? Forcing a person with dementia to accept parts of reality that they cannot understand is harmful.

Bring it All Together

Person with dementia: "Nobody is going to make decisions for me. You can go now, and don't come back!"

Caregiver: "I'm sorry (apologize), this is a tough time (validate). I love you and we're going to get through this together (reassure). It is important that you make your own decisions (don't reorient). You know what? I got a new recipe for banana bread (redirect). I think you love banana bread."

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