

Responding to Aggression in Dementia-Related Diseases

It's normal to feel hurt or surprised if someone suddenly lashes out at you for no obvious reason. It's important to understand what causes anger in dementia and how you can respond. [1]

People living with dementia-related diseases can develop intense feelings of anger and frustration that lead to aggression. This usually occurs in the middle stages of the disease. [2]

Angry Behavior

Here are some behaviors that you might see:

- Voice raising and/or yelling and screaming
- Foul language
- Throwing things or flailing arms
- Hitting, kicking, pushing
- Scowling
- Impatient

What Causes Aggression

Aggressive behavior can be related to the disease itself, a reaction to medication and/or the emotional toll of dementia. [4]



Physical Factors

The number one thing to rule out is pain or physical discomfort.

- Can the person tell you what is causing the pain or discomfort?
- Is the person fatigued?
- Are medications causing side effects?



Misunderstandings and Environment

Communication affects dementia behavior. Someone may have trouble understanding what a person is saying or doing.

- Are your instructions simple and easy to understand?
- Are you making too many statements at once?
- Is the person picking up on your stress?



Fast Facts

These symptoms affect about 90% of people with dementia. [3]

- Agitation
- Aggression
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Psychosis



If you feel that you or the person is unable to calm down, seek assistance from others. Always call 911 in emergency situations and stay out of reach if possible. Remain calm and give them plenty of space.

The Alzheimer's Association Helpline is 800-272-3900.



Loss of Recognition

Loss of recognition causes fear, anxiety and aggression.

- Does the person feel lost?

For example, a person with dementia is in the library they use all the time and suddenly, doesn't know where to find what they need. She starts yelling and flailing her arms because she is experiencing frustration and anxiety mixed with fear.



Poor Food Intake

Poor food intake can cause behavior problems in people with dementia. It can affect mood, energy and cognitive functions that lead to aggressive impulses.

Responding to Aggression

Here are some tips to help respond to aggressive behavior from a person with dementia related diseases.

- Rule out pain first.
- Try to identify the immediate cause. What might have triggered the behavior?
- Focus on the feelings behind the words or actions, not on specific details.
- Don't argue or get upset. Remain calm, positive and reassuring. Speak slow and in a soft tone, rather than harsh and reactive.
- Limit distractions and help the person adapt as well as possible.
- Give space and time for the person to feel safe.
- Use distraction to focus on another activity to distract from the immediate situation.
- Limit to one-on-one interactions for easier communication and understanding.
- Ensure safety making sure you and the person are safe.

References

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