

This is one in a series of fact sheets which aim to give some practical information and tips to support residents, friends and family affected by dementia.



Behaviours that challenge / Distressed response

This fact sheet discusses some of the behaviours that can challenge us, what are some of the common causes of such behaviours, and some possible strategies to respond in a calm, caring and person centred way.

A person living with dementia may at times start behaving in a different or unusual way, and this may indicate that they are distressed or agitated. Their behaviour might be seen by others as inappropriate, embarrassing or even aggressive, and it might be difficult to understand.

This fact sheet discusses some of the behaviours that can challenge us, what are some of the common causes of such behaviours, and some possible strategies to respond in a calm, caring and person centred way.

What are the behaviours that challenge?

At times a person living with dementia may display behaviours which exhibit distress, are unusual or even aggressive. In the past, such actions were referred to as 'challenging behaviours'. However, it is important to realise that individuals living with dementia are not behaving in this manner to be deliberately difficult, this may be the only way that they can communicate their needs to other people. These behaviours can often be distressing for both them and those around them.

Types of behaviours

Some common examples of behaviours which may be displayed by individuals living with dementia include:

- Agitation including restlessness
- Repetitive behaviour
- Shouting and screaming
- Sleep disturbance and night-time waking
- Sundowning (see fact sheet)
- Hiding, hoarding and losing things
- Accusing
- Trailing, following and checking
- Losing their inhibitions (including inappropriate sexual behaviour)

Possible causes of behaviours that challenge

Individuals living with dementia may, at times, find it difficult to recognise, meet or communicate their needs.

Possible explanations of such behaviour can be seen below. Some behaviours might be related to a physical need (such as health problems), a psychological need (how the person is thinking and feeling) and/or a social need (how they are relating to other people or the environment).

An individual's physical needs may include:

- Being in and responding to pain
- Having some form of infection
- Experiencing the side effects of medication
- Experiencing hallucinations
- Having difficulty with poor eyesight or hearing

Psychological needs may include:

- Not feeling listened to or respected
- Other mental ill-health concerns or difficulties
- Feeling distressed about a range of things including the environment and other people's behaviour or responses
- Being unable to make sense of something which is happening around them, or that they are seeing on TV or hearing on the radio
- Misunderstanding the intentions of others

General tips

A resident's social needs may include:

- Feeling lonely or isolated
- Feeling a lack of stimulation (boredom)
- Feeling confused about the people around them

Managing behaviours that challenge / distressed response

Some useful steps that could be taken include:

- Identifying the problem and what it relates to
- Identifying what is the precursor to the behaviour
- Looking at the situation, seeing when and where the behaviour takes place, are there any patterns to it?
- Looking at how a person feels when they behave in this manner. Is the person living with dementia in pain? Tired? Frustrated? Etc.
- Identifying anything which the person may be reacting to, based on what you and others know about them.

Some general tips that could help manage and reduce behaviours that challenge:

- Help the person living with dementia maintain their regular daily routine.
- Take time to explain to others about their dementia and some types of behaviour they may exhibit so that others can have greater understanding.
- Help the person living with dementia to understand information by using very clear terms, providing them with small chunks of information at a time so they can absorb the information easily, and speaking more slowly.
- Always try and think from the point of view of the person living with dementia. You might find their behaviour frustrating or inappropriate, but bear in mind that it may be their only way of attempting to reduce their feelings of confusion and/or distress, or to seek help.
- The more you know about the person living with dementia the more you are likely to understand their way of behaving.

