

Agitated and Angry Behavior in Aging Persons

Understanding Why Difficult Behaviors Occur and Problem-Solving Strategies

It can be helpful for caregivers to try to understand why the person with dementia is behaving in a particular way. If caregivers can determine what may be causing or triggering the behavior, it may then be possible to prevent the difficult behavior from occurring again.

Causes Related to Physical/Emotional Health

- 1) **Effects of medications.** People with dementia (and elderly people in general) are vulnerable to over medication, to reactions from combinations of drugs, and to their side effects. Drugs can cause confusion as well as sudden changes in a person's level of functioning. Falling, drowsiness, a sudden increase in agitation, strange mouth or hand movements may be side effects of medication and should be reported to the doctor immediately.
- 2) **Impaired vision or hearing.** Both these problems can affect a person's ability to understand what is being said, and should be ruled out or addressed by the doctor. If caregivers are aware of these deficits, they can often help the person to compensate for them.
- 3) **Acute Illness** such a urinary tract infection, pneumonia, gastrointestinal infection or fever may lead to increased confusion. Any sudden changes in behavior should be reported to the doctor so a medical work-up can be done.
- 4) **Chronic Illness** such as angina, congestive heart failure or diabetes can affect a person's mood and/or level of functioning. Also, chronic pain associated with arthritis, ulcers or headaches can cause irritability.
- 5) **Dehydration.** Many people with dementia don't get enough fluids, because they no longer recognize the sensation of thirst or they forget to drink. Symptoms of dehydration may include dizziness, confusion, refusal to drink, skin that appears dry, flushing and fever, and rapid pulse.
- 6) **Constipation.** This can be very uncomfortable and eventually can lead to bowel impaction. In some people with dementia, fecal impaction can contribute to delusional behavior.
- 7) **Depression.** Many of the symptoms of depression, such as impaired concentration, memory loss, apathy and sleep disturbances resemble those of dementia. It is often very difficult to tell which are caused by depression or by the dementia itself or are a combination of both of these problems.
- 8) **Physical discomfort** because the person's immediate needs aren't being met. For example, the person may be hungry, the temperature of the room may be too warm or too cold.

Causes Related to the Environment

- 1) **Environment too large.** Sometimes the physical space in which the person with dementia is living is just too confusing.
- 2) **Too much clutter.** Sometimes there is just too much in the environment for the person to try and absorb. Whenever possible, simplify the environment so that the confused person is not overwhelmed.
- 3) **Excessive stimulation.** When there is too much going on in the environment, such as music during conversation or there are too many people around, some people with dementia may respond with anger or frustration.
- 4) **Unstructured environment.** People with dementia need a certain amount of routine and daily structure on which they can depend. This consistency is important in helping to minimize the amount of stress the person with memory loss may be experiencing. At the same time, there needs to be flexibility in the daily routine to accommodate the changing moods of the person.
- 5) **Unfamiliar environment.** An environment which is new or unfamiliar is more likely to be confusing. This has implications for persons transferred from one facility to another or one room to another.

Problem-Solving

- 1) When does the problem occur? Keep a log or record, describing the problem or situation—the time, what happened, what was going on right before the behavior occurred, who was involved (in as much detail as possible). This can be helpful in identifying patterns in terms of time of day, triggering events, etc.
- 2) Try to pinpoint specific causes. Is the problem related to the person's health or environment?
- 3) Develop a list of alternative strategies for responding to the behavior/situation. Be creative and think outside the box.
- 4) Problem-solving is a process of trial and error. Be flexible and adjust approaches as needed.
- 5) Remember the behavior is caused by a brain disease and the person is not trying to be nasty toward you—so don't take it personally.
- 6) You are not in this alone. It's okay to ask for help or to form a team to address the situation.

Your Approach

- 1) **Think about how you are presenting yourself.** People with dementia are often very sensitive to non-verbal signals such as facial expression, body tension. If you are angry or tense, they are likely to become angry, anxious, or annoyed.
- 2) **Use a calm, gentle, matter-of-fact approach.** Try humor, cheerfulness. Humor or gentle teasing is more successful than ordering or demanding.
- 3) **Try using touch to help convey your message.** Gentle touch can help convey the message that you care. Some people shy away from touch, but most find a gentle touch reassuring.
- 4) **Begin conversations with orienting information.** Identify yourself and call the person by name. After creating a relaxed atmosphere, explain what it is you propose to do in simple terms.
- 5) **Talk in a warm, easy-going pleasant manner.** Use a tone of voice that you would like people to use with you. There is a tendency to raise your voice when someone doesn't understand you, but this will upset the person and make communication more difficult.
- 6) **Use simple, short sentences.** Try to ask "yes/no" questions instead of open-ended questions. Use very concrete and familiar words. Pause between sentences to allow plenty of time for information to be understood