

behaviors

**How to respond when
dementia causes
unpredictable behaviors**



Alzheimer's disease and erratic behaviors

Alzheimer's disease and other dementias can cause people to act in different and unpredictable ways. Some individuals become anxious or aggressive. Others repeat certain questions or gestures. Many misinterpret what they hear.

These types of reactions can lead to misunderstanding, frustration and tension, particularly between the person with dementia and the caregiver. It's important to understand that the person is not trying to be difficult and that all behavior is communication.





The Alzheimer's Association® offers suggestions for responding to dementia-related behaviors.

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1. identify behaviors

The following three-step approach can help you identify common dementia-related behaviors and their causes.

1. Examine the behavior

- › What was the behavior? Was it harmful?
- › Did something trigger it?
- › What happened immediately after?
- › Could something be causing the person pain?
- › Could this be related to medications or illness? Consult a physician to be sure.

2. Explore potential solutions

- › Are the person's needs being met?
- › Can adapting the surroundings comfort the person?
- › How can you change your reaction or approach?

3. Try different responses

- › Did your new response help?
- › Do you need to explore other potential causes and solutions? If so, what can you do differently?

Negative behavior may be related to:

- › **Physical pain or discomfort** – Illnesses, medication, hunger or thirst.
- › **Overstimulation** – Loud noises or a busy environment.
- › **Unfamiliar surroundings** – New places or the inability to recognize home.
- › **Complicated tasks** – Difficulty with activities or chores.
- › **Frustrating interactions** – Inability to communicate effectively may cause fear, sadness or anxiety.

2. aggression

Aggressive behavior may be verbal (shouting, name calling) or physical (hitting, pushing). It's important to try to understand what is causing the anger, as it can occur suddenly with no apparent reason or can result from a frustrating situation.

How to respond:

Rule out pain as the cause of the behavior

Pain can cause a person with dementia to act aggressively.

Try to identify the immediate cause

Think about what happened right before, which may have triggered the behavior.

Focus on feelings, not facts

Look for the feelings behind the words or actions.

Try not to get upset

Be positive and reassuring. Speak slowly in a soft tone.

Limit distractions

Examine the person's surroundings and adapt them to avoid other similar situations.

Try a relaxing activity

Use music, massage or exercise to help soothe the person.

Shift the focus to another activity

If a situation or activity causes an aggressive response, try something different.

Speak calmly

Using a calm tone, try to reassure the person.

Take a break

If the person is in a safe environment and you are able, walk away and take a moment for yourself.

Ensure safety

Make sure you and the person are safe. If the person is unable to calm down, seek assistance from others. Always call 911 in emergency situations.

3. anxiety or agitation

People with dementia can become anxious or agitated for many reasons. It can help to learn what triggers this response by looking at the person's surroundings, the time of day, what has just occurred, and evaluating potential sources of pain, hunger, need for sleep and sudden changes.

How to respond:

Check for pain

Pain can often trigger anxiety or agitation. Sources include being in an uncomfortable situation, injury, reaction to medication or a urinary tract infection.

Listen to the frustration

Find out what may be causing the anxiety.

Provide reassurance

Use calming phrases. Let the individual know you are there.

Involve the person in activities

Engage the person in art, music or other activities to distract him or her from anxiety and promote relaxation.

Modify the environment

Decrease noise and distractions or relocate the person.

Find outlets for energy

The person may be looking for something to do. Take a walk or go for a car ride.





4. confusion

A person with Alzheimer's disease may not recognize familiar people, places or things. He or she may forget relationships, call family members by other names or become confused about where home is. The purpose of common items, such as a pen or fork may also be forgotten. These situations can be difficult for caregivers.

How to respond:

Stay calm

Not being recognized can be painful, but try not to make your hurt apparent.

Respond with a brief explanation

Don't overwhelm the person with lengthy responses. Instead, clarify with a simple explanation.

Show photos and other reminders

Use photographs and other thought-provoking items to remind the person of important relationships and places.

Offer corrections as suggestions

Avoid explanations that sound like scolding. Try "I thought it was a fork," or "I think he is your grandson Peter."

Try not to take it personally

Alzheimer's disease causes forgetfulness, but your support and understanding will continue to be appreciated.

5. repetition

A person with Alzheimer's disease may do or say something over and over again — like repeating a word, question or activity. The person may also pace or undo what has just been done. In most cases, he or she is likely looking for comfort, security and familiarity. These actions are rarely harmful, but can be stressful for the caregiver.

How to respond:

Look for a reason

Try to find out if there is a specific cause or trigger for the repetitive behavior.

Focus on the emotion

Rather than reacting to what the person is doing, respond to how he or she is feeling.

Turn the action or behavior into an activity

If the person is rubbing his or her hand across the table, provide a cloth and ask for help with dusting.

Stay calm and be patient

Reassure the person with a calm voice and gentle touch.

Provide an answer

Give the person the answer that he or she is looking for, even if you have to repeat it several times. It may help to write it down and post it in a prominent location.

Engage the person in an activity

The individual may simply be bored and need a distraction. Engage the person in an activity like taking a walk or working on a puzzle.

Use memory aids

Offer reminders that are meaningful to the individual like notes, clocks, calendars or photographs.

6. suspicion

Memory loss and confusion may cause a person with Alzheimer's to perceive things in new and unusual ways. Individuals may become suspicious of those around them, even accusing others of theft, infidelity or other improper behavior. Sometimes a person with the disease may misinterpret what he or she sees and hears.

How to respond:

Don't take offense

Listen to what is troubling the person and try to be understanding. Then be reassuring, respond to the feeling and let the person know you care.

Don't argue or try to convince

Allow the individual to express ideas. Acknowledge his or her opinions.

Offer a simple answer

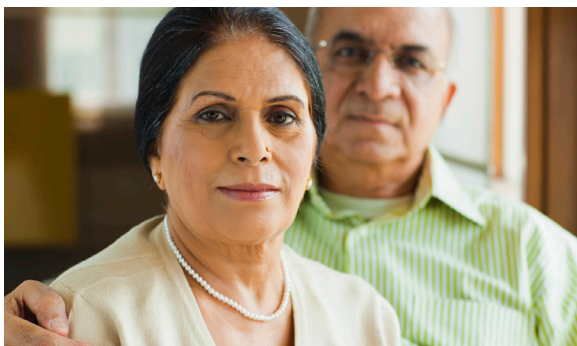
Share your thoughts, but keep it simple. Lengthy explanations can be overwhelming.

Switch the focus to another activity

Engage the individual in an activity or ask for help with a chore.

Duplicate any lost items

If the person often searches for a specific item, have several available. For example, if the individual is always looking for his or her wallet, purchase two of the same kind.



7. wandering and getting lost

It's common for a person with Alzheimer's to wander and/or become lost, and it can happen at any stage of the disease. In fact, six in 10 individuals with Alzheimer's will wander at some point. They may try to go home when already there or attempt to recreate a familiar routine, such as going to school or work.

As the disease progresses, the person with dementia will need increased supervision. At some point, it will no longer be safe for him or her to be left alone.

How to respond:

Encourage activity

Keeping the person with Alzheimer's active and engaged can help discourage wandering behavior by reducing anxiety and restlessness. Involve the person in activities such as doing dishes, folding laundry or preparing dinner. If the person shows interest in getting out of the house, consider safe outdoor activities such as an accompanied walk or gardening.

Inform others

Make sure friends, family and neighbors know that the person has Alzheimer's and that wandering may occur.

Make the home safe

Install deadbolt or slide-bolt locks on exterior doors and limit access to potentially dangerous areas.

Consider signing up for a location-management service

MedicAlert® + Alzheimer's Association Safe Return® is a 24-hour, nationwide emergency response service for individuals with dementia who wander or have a medical emergency. Alzheimer's Association Comfort Zone® is a Web application that allows family members to monitor a person's location. Call **800.272.3900** or visit **alz.org/safety** to learn more about these services.

8. trouble with sleep

People with dementia may have problems sleeping or experience changes in their sleep schedule. Sleep changes somehow result from the impact of Alzheimer's disease on the brain. However, the exact cause is unknown.

How to respond:

Make a comfortable environment

The sleeping area should be at a comfortable temperature. Provide nightlights and other ways to keep the person safe, such as appropriate door and window locks.

Maintain a schedule

As much as possible, encourage a regular routine of meals, waking up and going to bed.

Manage naps

If the person has trouble sleeping at night, it can be helpful to limit daytime naps.

Exercise

Try to include some type of exercise, as appropriate for the person, during the day. Physical activity may promote restfulness at night.

Avoid stimulants

Reduce or avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, which can all affect ability to sleep. Discourage watching television during periods of wakefulness at night, as it can be stimulating.

Talk to a doctor

Discuss sleep disturbances with a doctor to help identify causes and possible solutions. Most experts encourage the use of non-drug measures rather than medication.



alz.org/care

The Alzheimer's and Dementia Caregiver Center provides reliable information and access to resources, such as:

- › Alzheimer's Navigator® – Assess your needs and create customized action plans of information and support.
- › Community Resource Finder – Find local resources.
- › ALZConnected® – Connect with other caregivers and family members who can relate to your situation.
- › Care Team Calendar – Coordinate caregiving responsibilities among family and friends.
- › Safety Center – Access information and tools.



alz.org/findus

Support groups, education programs and more available in communities nationwide.



800.272.3900

24/7 Helpline – Available all day, every day.

alzheimer's association®

The Alzheimer's Association is the world's leading voluntary health organization in Alzheimer's care, support and research. Our mission is to eliminate Alzheimer's disease through the advancement of research; to provide and enhance care and support for all affected; and to reduce the risk of dementia through the promotion of brain health.

Our vision is a world without Alzheimer's®.

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