

Aggressive behaviours

This help sheet discusses the causes of aggressive behaviours, which may sometimes occur as a result of dementia, suggests some ways to manage and some sources of help.

What are aggressive behaviours?

Changes in the behaviour of people with dementia are very common. Sometimes this can include aggressive behaviours such as verbal abuse, verbal threats, hitting out, damaging property or physical violence towards another person.

What causes these behaviours?

There are many reasons why behaviours change. Every person with dementia is an individual who will react to circumstances in their own way. Sometimes the behaviour may be related to changes taking place in the brain. In other instances, there may be events or factors in the environment triggering the behaviour. In some instances a task may be too complex, or the person may not be feeling well.

Understanding the behaviours

It is important to try to understand why the person with dementia is behaving in a particular way. If family members and carers can determine what may be triggering the behaviour, it may be easier to figure out ways to prevent the behaviour happening again.

Some frequent causes of agitated behaviours are:

Health factors

- Fatigue
- Disruption of sleep patterns causing sleep deprivation
- Physical discomfort such as pain, fever, illness or constipation
- Loss of control over behaviours due to the physical changes in the brain
- Adverse side effects of medication
- Impaired vision or hearing causing the person to misinterpret sight and sounds
- Hallucinations

Defensive behaviours

A person with dementia may feel humiliated because they are forced to accept help with intimate functions such as bathing. They may feel their independence and privacy are being threatened.

Failure

Because they are no longer able to cope with everyday demands a person with dementia may feel pressured or frustrated.

Misunderstanding

No longer understanding what is going on may lead to bewilderment, or the person may become distressed by an awareness of their declining abilities.

Fear

The person with dementia may become frightened because they no longer recognise certain places or people. They may seek places that were familiar to them at an earlier time in their life or may be recalling an earlier life experience that is frightening or uncomfortable to remember.

Need for some attention

A person with dementia may be trying to let someone know that they are bored, distressed, have an excess of energy or feel ill.

What to try**To prevent aggressive behaviours:**

- Always discuss concerns about aggressive behaviour with the doctor, who will be able to check whether there is a physical illness or discomfort present, and provide some advice. The doctor will also be able to advise if there may be an underlying psychiatric illness or undesirable side-effects of medication
- Be aware of the warning signs of aggression
- Eliminate possible causes of stress
- Ensure that there is an unrushed and consistent routine
- Keep the environment consistent
- Make sure your communication matches the persons communication ability
- Avoid confrontation. Either distract the person's attention or suggest an alternative activity
- Make sure the person gets enough exercise and participates in activities
- Make sure they are comfortable

Despite your best efforts the person may still become aggressive. Concentrate on handling the situation as calmly and effectively as possible.

When aggressive behaviours occur:

- Stay calm. Speak in a calm, reassuring voice
- Address the underlying feeling if possible
- A simple suggestion such as having a drink together, going for a walk or looking at a magazine together may help. Distraction and avoidance are often the most useful approaches
- If you feel unsafe, stand out of reach. Closing in or trying to restrain the person, unless absolutely necessary, can make matters worse. You may need to leave them until they have calmed down
- If you have developed some strategies for managing aggressive behaviours try to make sure that they are used by any other people who are also caring for the person with dementia

Aggressive behaviours can be very difficult for families and carers. The behaviours are symptoms of dementia and are not meant to deliberately upset you. Remember to look after yourself and take regular breaks from caring.

Looking after yourself:

- Remain calm
- If you do become frustrated or lose your temper, regard it as a sign that you need extra support. Talk it over with your doctor, a friend or a counsellor
- Prepare a safe haven for yourself if aggressive behaviour is a problem. This can be a room which locks from the inside, preferably with a phone
- It is not always easy to forget these incidents. They may leave you feeling quite shaky
- Take regular breaks from caring

Who can help?

Discuss with the doctor your concerns about behaviour changes, and their impact on you.

The Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service (DBMAS) is a national telephone advisory service for families, carers and care workers who are concerned about the behaviours of people with dementia. The service provides confidential advice, assessment, intervention, education and specialised support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and can be contacted on **1800 699 799**.

Further Information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at dementia.org.au



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**