

Changes in behaviour

This help sheet is about changes in behaviour that may occur in people living with dementia and possible causes.

Dementia affects people in different ways and changes in the behaviour or emotional state of a person living with dementia are common. Changes can include anxiety, agitation, aggression, hallucinations, loss of inhibition and depression.

There are many reasons why someone living with dementia may behave in a certain way. Every person will react differently.

Sometimes the behaviour may be caused by:

- changes in the brain caused by dementia
- an underlying illness, such as an infection or pain
- difficulties with communication
- something in their living environment.

Understanding changes in behaviour

When someone living with dementia behaves in way that is different from their normal behaviour or patterns, try to understand what may be triggering their behaviour or what the behaviour is communicating. You can then find ways to minimise the risk of, or respond to, the behaviour happening again.

It can help to keep a daily record describing the behaviour. Make a note of:

- when the behaviour occurred
- who was involved
- what was happening in their environment before it occurred (i.e. noise, performing a daily task)
- what actually occurred (be specific about what the person was doing or saying i.e. walking up and down, looking anxious)
- who was affected by the behaviour
- how you responded and whether it worked.

Possible causes

There are five categories of possible causes for changes in behaviour:

1. health (physical, emotional and psychological)
2. communication
3. personal history
4. environment
5. performing tasks.

1. Health (physical, emotional and psychological)

Medication. Certain drugs can cause confusion or sudden changes in functioning. People living with dementia are vulnerable to side effects, over-medication and reactions from combining multiple drugs.

Impaired vision and hearing. Vision and hearing impairments can affect someone's ability to understand what is happening.

Acute illness. It can be hard to recognise acute (sudden onset) illness in someone living with dementia as they may be unable to describe their symptoms. Illnesses like urinary tract infections, pneumonia, gastrointestinal infection or fever can cause increased confusion.

Delirium is common. It develops over a short period of time and symptoms tend to fluctuate throughout the day. It can be caused by severe illness, constipation, dehydration, infection, pain, drug effects or withdrawal (especially from alcohol and sedative drugs).

Chronic illness. Chronic (long-lasting) illnesses can affect a person's mood and level of functioning. These illnesses include angina, heart problems, diabetes or the pain associated with arthritis, ulcers or headaches.

Pain. People living with dementia can and do experience pain. However, they may not be able to communicate clearly when they are in pain, or they may not be able to accurately interpret pain signals.

Dehydration. Dementia can affect someone's ability to recognise the sensation of thirst. They may also forget to drink water regularly. This can cause dehydration. Symptoms may include confusion, dizziness, dry-looking skin, flushing, fever or a rapid pulse.

Constipation. Constipation can be very uncomfortable and lead to painful bowel problems. It can sometimes also cause an increased level of confusion.

Depression. Many symptoms of depression are similar to the symptoms of dementia. These include lack of concentration, memory loss, apathy and sleep disturbances. It can be difficult to tell whether symptoms are caused by depression or dementia, or a combination of both. A diagnosis of depression is possible through medical assessment.

Fatigue. Disrupted sleep patterns can cause angry or agitated behaviour.

Physical discomfort. Physical discomfort may be expressed through changes in behaviour. The person may be hungry, bloated or need to go to the toilet. They may be too cold or too warm.

Unmet emotional and physical needs. People living with dementia still want to feel useful and included. Your loved one may react negatively if these needs are not being met.

2. Communication

Changes in communication are common. The person may find it hard to express themselves clearly or to understand what others say. As the dementia progresses, communication can become more difficult.

They may feel frustrated if they cannot make themselves understood.

3. Personal history

Changes in behaviour can sometimes be explained by understanding someone's life history. For example, the person may need the toilet, so they go outside looking for the outdoor toilet that they used as a child. Or, dementia may cause the person to relive past traumatic events.

4. Environment

Environments. Large physical living spaces can be overwhelming. Confined spaces without visual or physical access to outdoors can heighten anxiety.

Clutter. Clutter can be overstimulating and make it hard for the person to make sense of their environment.

Unfamiliar environments. New or unfamiliar environments can be confusing. The person may experience problems with new learning, memory and perception. This can trigger changes in behaviour.

Stimulating environments. Behaviour can change when there is too much stimulation in the environment. This includes loud music or noise from the television or too many people talking in the background.

Understimulation can also cause changes in behaviour. This may be due to the person feeling bored, inactive or lacking a sense of purpose.

Confusing sensory environments. Lighting, visual contrast and the use of colour can affect behaviour and level of functioning. For example:

- Dim lighting can make it hard to concentrate while eating.
- Patterned floor tiles can look like steps, causing someone to trip or feel unsteady. Black flooring can be seen as a hole or a void.
- Glare from sunlight or a polished floor can affect sight.
- Shadows can contribute to hallucinations.

5. Performing tasks

Complicated tasks. Dementia is a progressive condition. Tasks that were once easy may become too complicated or may require more time to complete, causing frustration.

Unfamiliar tasks. People living with dementia gradually lose the ability to learn new tasks and skills. Expecting the person to learn an unfamiliar task may be unrealistic.

Changes in routine. Changes in routine can cause stress. Try to maintain daily routines and structure. If the person requires assistance for personal care tasks, seek help from people who are familiar to the person. Consider the person's feelings due to the intimate nature of the situation.

Develop a plan

Create a list of things to try to minimise triggers for changes in behaviour, and ways to respond to them. Below are some suggestions:

- Engage the person in activities that are meaningful to them.
- Think about ways to connect to the person and how they view their world.
- Remove or reduce environmental triggers.
- Create spaces that support engagement and wellbeing.
- Prepare a list of ways to respond to changes in behaviour. Be creative.
- Write a plan to respond to changes in behaviour that make a situation or environment unsafe.
- Plan for visits to potentially challenging environments, for example a noisy shopping centre or busy waiting room.

When your plan has been prepared, have someone else review the plan and invite their suggestions.

Developing a plan is a process of trial and error. There are no simple solutions. Triggers for changes in behaviour may change as the condition progresses. If the strategies you use are ineffective, try something else. It is worth persevering. What does not work today may work tomorrow.

Where to get help

- Discuss with the person's doctor your concerns about changes in behaviour, and their impact on you and the person you are caring for.
- Call the **National Dementia Helpline** on **1800 100 500** to learn about support services and education programs, including carer support groups, counselling, and services and programs to assist you to understand and respond to changes and maintain your health and wellbeing.
- Call the **Dementia Behaviour Management Advisory Service** on **1800 699 799**. They support people living with dementia who experience changes in behaviour that impact their care or the carer.

Additional reading and resources

- Dementia Australia help sheets: Changes in behaviour
Visit: dementia.org.au/help-sheets
- Dementia Australia library
Visit: dementia.org.au/library
- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: dementia.org.au/education

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: dementia.org.au