

Alzheimer's disease and related dementias can cause a person to act in different and unpredictable ways. Some individuals with Alzheimer's 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 is important to understand that the person is not acting that way on purpose.

Behavior may be related to:

- Physical discomfort — Illnesses or medication
- Over stimulation — 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

Use this three-step approach to help identify common behaviors and their causes:

1. Identify and examine the behavior
—What was the behavior? Is it harmful to the individual or others?
—What happened just before the behavior occurred? Did something trigger it?
—What happened immediately after the behavior occurred? How did you react?
—Consult a physician to identify any causes related to medications or illness.
2. Explore potential solutions
—What are the needs of the person with dementia? Are they being met?
—Can adapting the surroundings comfort the person?
—How can you change your reaction or your approach to the behavior? Are you responding in a calm and supportive way?
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?

10 Quick Tips Responding to Behaviors

1. Remain flexible, patient and calm
2. Respond to the emotion, not the behavior
3. Don't argue or try to convince
4. Use memory aids
5. Acknowledge requests, and respond to them
6. Look for the reasons behind each behavior
7. Consult a physician to identify any causes related to medications or illness
8. Explore various solutions
9. Don't take the behavior personally
10. Share your experiences with others

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Behaviors

The causes of dementia-related behavior like aggression, and how to respond



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Dementia affects each person differently. There are five common behaviors with recommended responses: aggression, anxiety or agitation, confusion, repetition and suspicion.

Aggression

Aggressive behaviors may be verbal (shouting, name-calling) or physical (hitting, pushing). These behaviors can occur suddenly, with no apparent reason, or can result from a frustrating situation. Whatever the case, it is important to try to understand what is causing the person to become angry or upset.

How to respond:

- Try to identify the immediate cause
- Focus on feelings, not facts
- Don't get angry or upset
- Limit distractions
- Try a relaxing activity
- Shift the focus to another activity



Anxiety or Agitation

A person with Alzheimer's may feel anxious or agitated. He or she may become restless and need to move around or pace. Or the person may become upset in certain places or focused on specific details. He or she may also become over-reliant on a certain caregiver for attention and direction.

How to respond:

- Listen to the frustration
- Provide reassurance
- Involve the person in activities
- Modify the environment
- Find outlets for the person's energy



Confusion

The person with Alzheimer's 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 person may also forget the purpose of common items, such as a pen or fork. These situations are extremely difficult for caregivers and require much patience and understanding.

How to respond:

- Stay calm
- Respond with a brief explanation
- Show photos and other reminders
- Offer corrections as suggestions
- Try not to take it personally

Repetition

A person with Alzheimer's may do or say something over and over again — like repeating a word, question or activity. In most cases, he or she is probably looking for comfort, security and familiarity.

The person may also pace or undo what has just been finished. These actions are rarely harmful to the person with Alzheimer's but can be stressful for the caregiver.

How to respond:

- Look for a reason behind the repetition"
- Focus on the emotion, not the behavior
- Turn the action or behavior into an activity
- Stay calm, and be patient
- Provide an answer
- Engage the person in an activity
- Use memory aids
- Accept the behavior, and work with it

Suspicion

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

- How to respond:
- Don't take offense
- Don't argue or try to convince
- Offer a simple answer
- Switch the focus to another activity
- Duplicate any lost items



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