

Aggressive behaviour

If you are caring for someone with dementia you may find that they sometimes seem to behave in an aggressive way. They may be verbally abusive or threatening, for example: kick or punch, or they may lash out violently at people or property. If such behaviours occur you will probably feel distressed and anxious about the best way to cope. Here are some suggestions.



A person with dementia may react in what appears to be an aggressive manner if they feel frightened or humiliated, or frustrated because they are unable to understand others or make themselves understood.

Someone may also become aggressive if their judgment and self-control has been eroded by the dementia. They may no longer be restrained by inhibitions learned in early childhood and they may forget how to behave appropriately.

Aggressive behaviour sometimes seems to take the form of an over-reaction. The person may shout or scream or become very agitated as a result of what appears to be a very minor setback or criticism.

Any form of aggression is upsetting but it is important to remember that the person is not being aggressive deliberately. They will probably forget the incident very quickly, although the emotion which caused them to behave in that way may persist. You may take longer to forget the incident than they do.

Triggers for aggression

If you look carefully at the situations in which the person becomes aggressive and the event that lead up to the outburst, you may be able to identify the trigger and gain some understanding of what might be troubling them. Of course, it not possible to analyse such a situation until it is over. But, once the heat of the moment has passed, you may be able to think about what happened and why.

If there seems to be no pattern to the behaviour and it is becoming very difficult to manage, seek professional advice. One of the side effects of multiple medications can be aggression.

Possible reasons for a person with dementia behaving aggressively include situations in which they:

Feel frustrated under pressure or humiliated because they are no longer able to cope with the everyday demands of life. It takes longer for a person with dementia to process information and respond to a situation – in words or in actions. It is therefore common for them to feel pressured.

Experience a sudden change in the environment or caregiver arrangement.

Feel they are being judged or criticized because they have forgotten something or made a mistake in completing an everyday task.

Feel their independence and privacy are threatened because they are forced to accept help with intimate functions such as washing, dressing or going to the toilet. These are areas of life, which have been private since childhood. It is not surprising that these situations become particularly stressful.

Feel bewildered or frightened because there is too much noise or too many people around them or there has been a change in a familiar routine.

All these things can be hard for a person with dementia to manage. The person may also react aggressively in situations where they:

Feel anxious or threatened because they are no longer able to recognize certain places or people. They may be convinced that they are in the wrong place or that a relative is a stranger who must have broken into their home.

Feel frightened because of a sudden noise, sharp voices, abrupt movements or a person approaching them without warning from behind. Too much noise or too many people may add to their confusion.

Feel discomfort, pain, boredom or thirst. Exclude any underlying medical condition, e.g. Infection.

Please contact the DEMENTIA SA Office

Support | Awareness | Education | Counseling | Training | Resource centre | Advocacy
info@dementiasa.org or support@dementiasa.org *www.dementiasa.org*

National Helpline 0860 MEMORY / 0860 636 679

Preventative measures

If you can identify what may be upsetting the person with dementia you may be able to reassure them or find ways of making situations less distressing. Try to obtain advice from other carers or from professionals. If appropriate:

Reduce demands on the person if they do not seem to be coping, and ensure that there is an unrushed and stress-free routine.

Explain things, wherever possible, calmly and in simple sentences, allowing more time for the person to respond than they would formerly have needed.

Find tactful ways to offer help without seeming to take over.

Guide or prompt the person and break down tasks into easily manageable steps so that they can do as much as possible for themselves.

Try not to criticize. Hide any irritation that you feel. Avoid situations where the person is set up to fail. Praise any achievements and focus on the things which the person can still do, rather than on those which are no longer possible.

Watch out for warning signs such as anxiety or agitated behaviour or restlessness and offer more reassurance, if appropriate.

Avoid sharp voices and sudden movement.

Avoid confrontation. Try to distract the person's attention if they seem upset. You might find that it helps if you leave the room for a few moments.

Find activities to stimulate the person's interest. Make sure that they take enough exercise.

Make sure that the person has regular health checks and consult the GP immediately if they are suffering any discomfort.

Guide or prompt the person and break down tasks into easily manageable steps so that they can do as much as possible for themselves.

Coping measures

Prevention is the best solution for aggressive behaviour but it will not always work. If this type of behaviour occurs, don't blame yourself.

Concentrate instead on handling it as calmly and effectively as possible at the time.

Try to stay calm and do not enter into an argument no matter how upset you feel. A heated response will probably make the situation worse.

Take a deep breath and count to ten before you react. Reassure the person and try to distract their attention. Leave the room if necessary.

Try not to show any anxiety as this may increase the person's agitation. Of course, this is easy to say and much harder to do if you feel threatened. You might be able to plan some strategies in advance, which you could use in such situations, such as:

- Simplify routines and environment
- Allow periods of rest between stimulating activities.
- Make living area safe and secure

More Helpful Hints during an aggressive episode:

- Back off and limit stimuli e.g. sound
- Guide person to choose between 2 options...

Statements like:

- May I help you to
- Would you like to help me to
- I'm sorry you are upset.
- I'll stay close by until you feel better

Do Not:

- Raise your voice
- Show offence or alarm
- Restrain, demand, force, confront

Helpful hints to prevent aggressive episodes:

- Change your expectations
- Move person to a quieter space
- Limit caffeine intake
- Soothing rituals
- Avoid environmental triggers

Monitor personal comfort e.g. bladder, pain, fatigue, fever.

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Notes:

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