

Anger/Agitation

Recognizing the warning signs and what to try

All of us can become angry or worried about things that are happening. The difference is that for those with dementia, these reactions may become more pronounced than the situation warrants. The reactions may occur with little warning. It can become difficult for the caregiver to handle emotional outbursts, especially if this behavior is out of character and the caregiver feels threatened in any way.

Some behavior changes that may occur because of the disease:

- Pacing, fiddling, sleeplessness, unable to settle down.
- Talking constantly, repeating words and phrases.
- Lashing out physically or verbally
- Threatening motions
- Damage to property

Look for early signs of anger or agitation. If you see the signs, you can deal with the cause before problem behaviors start. Try not to ignore the problem. Doing nothing can make things worse.

Possible causes

Most of the time, behavior caused by anger and agitation happens for a reason. The person with dementia may not be able to tell you what they are feeling so you may need to try and find the cause.

- Health factors such as pain, fever, illness, adverse side effects of medication, impaired vision or hearing, fatigue, hunger or thirst.
- Environmental issues such as too much stimulation, too much noise and confusion, poor lighting.
- Increasing dependency resulting in feelings of being frightened, frustrated, humiliated, loss of control.

- Changes taking place in the brain which may cause loss of judgement and self-control, misunderstanding situations, not recognizing where they are, inability to do things, unable to communicate and be understood, loss of inhibitions.

Using the ABC problem solving approach

Antecedent:

- Try to identify the trigger or what is causing the behavior.
- Observe the person to see if it could be a health problem.
- Look around the environment to see what is happening. Is it noisy, too many people, too dark?
- What activity is the person trying to do? Is it too difficult? Are you taking over? Do they seem frustrated?
- Listen to words they are using. Are they aware of where they are, who they are with?

Behavior:

- Observe and listen.
- Try to name the behavior. For example, "She is anxious because...."
- Is the behavior worrisome and leading to being out of control?

Consequence:

- How you handle the issue will determine whether the outcome will be a positive one.
- Try to remove the trigger and/or change your response to the behavior.

What to try:

- Stay calm and speak in a calm voice.
- Look for an immediate cause or trigger and try to remove if possible.

- Look beyond the behavior to determine why there is anxiety. Try to address the underlying feeling. Use reassurance.
- Use distraction. Suggest a simple activity you can do together. Distraction and avoidance are often the most useful approaches.
- You may need to give the person space to cool down. If your safety is threatened, leave.

How to prevent

The best way to help prevent anger and agitation from getting out of control is to recognize the warning signs of these behaviors and take action immediately. This will help the person feel more calm and reassured. Other things to keep in mind are:

- Make sure the person has regular health checks. Consult the family doctor immediately if they seem to be ill or in discomfort.
- Agitation can be a symptom of depression. If you suspect that depression may be a problem for the person with dementia discuss it with the doctor. It is important to investigate and treat depression where it is suspected.
- If the person with dementia does not seem to be coping well, reduce any demands and make sure they have an unrushed and stress-free routine.
- Find tactful ways to offer help without seeming to take over. Guide or prompt the person, and break tasks down into easily manageable steps so that they can do as much as possible.
- Avoid confrontation. Either distract their attention or suggest an alternative activity.
- Allow the person to keep as much control in his or her life as possible.
- Praise any achievements, and focus on the things that the person can still do, rather than what is no longer possible.
- Build quiet times into the day. Make sure the person gets enough exercise, and participates in meaningful activities.

- Let it go. Do not try to remind the person about an event after it has passed. They will most likely not remember it. Forgive yourself if you did not respond the way that you would have liked to.

Communication strategies that may help

- Always approach the person from the front, speak to the person before touching him/her, and make sure the person has a way out if they become upset.
- Reassure the person. Speak calmly. Listen to his or her concerns and frustrations. Try to show that you understand if the person is angry or fearful.
- Make sure your communication matches the person's communication ability.
- Explain things calmly and in simple sentences. You should allow more time for the person to respond than they would have needed before the dementia.
- As the person's language skills diminish they will increasingly rely on **how** you say things rather than **what** you actually say. Maintain a calm and even tone of voice.
- Use "I" language to engage in conversation and focus on the feelings. This will help reduce conflict and prevent defensive behaviors. An example would be saying, "I can see that you are upset. Let me help you."
- If they are calling for someone from their past, try talking to them about this period in their life and respond to the feelings the person is showing. Avoid harsh facts that may cause distress. If the person they are asking for has died, they may not remember this fact and will feel they are hearing it for the first time.

Things to keep in mind

Remember that all behavior has meaning and is a form of communication. Look for early signs of anger and agitation and try to diffuse these feelings before things get out of control. Preventive measures may not work.

Do not blame yourself if the person still becomes agitated. Concentrate instead on handling the situation as calmly and effectively as possible. Reach out and contact your local Alzheimer Society. They can provide helpful strategies and also connect you with others who are experiencing similar experiences.

This fact sheet is provided courtesy of the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew County.

Further information on this topic

Visit the following websites:

- www.alzheimer.ca
- www.alzheimers.org.uk
- <http://www.alzheimer.ca/en/pei/Living-with-dementia/Day-to-day-living/Safety>

(July 2013)