Communication, Behaviors, and Emotional Changes in Dementia

Dementia is caused by changes in the brain that affect memory and thinking. This can affect the person's ability to function in daily life, including communicating with people around them. These changes can also cause changes in mood and behaviors. These changes become more noticeable and severe as dementia progresses.

Changes in Communication
The person may not be able to make others understand them or may not be able to understand others. They might have trouble finding the right words, have difficulty reading or writing, or take longer to process information. They might have difficulty focusing on tasks and forget things.

How to Help

- Help correct any vision or hearing problems. Ensure hearing aids and glasses are being used, if the person uses them.
- Reduce background noise by turning down the TV/radio or going somewhere quiet. Sit across from the person, so they can see you.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Use simple words, saying or asking one thing at a time.
- Allow enough time for the person to respond.
- If they do not respond, reword your question or show them what you are asking. For example, if asking if they need to use the restroom, try pointing to the restroom. Avoid repeating yourself or "helping" them find the right word. This often can cause frustration for some people with dementia.

As the ability to talk aloud declines, non-verbal ways of communication become more important for the person. Look at how the person is acting. This may tell you that they need or want something but are not able to tell you what that is.

Behavioral and Emotional Changes in Dementia
As dementia progresses, persons living with dementia might not be able to tell you what they need. As a result, they often develop behaviors to help communicate something they need or want to do. For instance, a person might pace back and forth or yell out when they need to use the restroom.

Persons living with dementia might also be unable to control their emotions. They might become withdrawn and not want to engage in things they enjoy. Or, they may become more easily frustrated, angry, or suspicious. When this happens, they might have more aggressive behaviors, such as hitting or throwing things. It is important to understand that persons living with dementia cannot control their behaviors or emotions. **They are not acting this way on purpose. It is their dementia.**

How to Help
Certain behaviors or emotions may represent very different needs for different people with dementia. For example, while pacing might mean that one person needs to use the restroom, it may mean that someone else is bored or anxious.

To figure out what a behavior means for your loved one, keep a journal or notebook with what you observe. You can use the **"ABC method"** to help.

- **A: Antecedent.** Write down what happened **just before** the behavior occurred.
    - What was the person doing or saying?
    - What were you doing or saying?
    - What was going on around the person?
- **B: Behavior.** Write down exactly what happened.
    - Where did the behavior occur?
    - When did the behavior occur?
    - Who was there when the behavior occurred?
    - What did the person say?
    - What did the person do?
    - What other observations did you make about the behavior?
- **C: Consequence.** Write down what happened **right after** the behavior.
    - What did the person say or do after the behavior occurred?
    - What did you say or do after the behavior occurred?
    - How did you respond to the behavior?

Using this information, now think about why the person reacted the way they did. Think about as many reasons for the behavior as possible. No reason is too silly. Remember, the reason for the behavior might not make sense to you but does to the person with dementia.

Once you've identified as many reasons for the behavior as you can, take one reason and think about how you can address it. Can you change how you or others approach the patient? Can you change the environment or the person's daily schedule? Try your plan out. If the behavior continues, move on to the next possible reason. Make a new plan and try it out, continuing this cycle until the behavior has improved. This might take several times.

Share what you've found with other people who might spend time or take care of your loved one. If your loved one is in the hospital, share what you observed with hospital staff. Being in a hospital can worsen behaviors because it is a new place, and they are not feeling well.

If a sudden change in emotion or behavior occurs, the doctor needs to be told. The doctor and medical team can look for any causes that can be treated such as an illness, injury, or side effects of medicines. Other factors could be stress, fatigue, and change in routine or environment.

Other tips for managing behavioral and emotional changes:

- Stay calm. This can be difficult to do but persons living with dementia can still sense if others are stressed or frustrated and can become even more stressed and frustrated.
- Provide reassurance and support to the person. Let them know you are there to help them.
- If there is a clear trigger or cause of the behavior, separate the person from it.
- Try to distract them with a favorite activity.
- Check to see if their basic needs have been met. Do they need to use the restroom? Are they hungry or thirsty? Are they tired and need to lie down?
- Talk with your loved one's doctor about behavioral and emotional changes you are seeing.

Just as problems with memory and thinking worsen over time with dementia, behaviors can also worsen. The reason for behaviors might change, or the person might develop new behaviors. If you find that what used to help no longer works, keep track of behaviors again to figure out what the new pattern is.

Sometimes, patients may need medicines to help. Talk with your loved one's doctor if you are having trouble dealing with the behaviors on your own.

How to Help Yourself

It can be hard and tiring to take care of someone with dementia, especially when they are experiencing difficulties with communication, behaviors, and emotions.

Share your problems with your loved one's healthcare team. They can help you find the best way to manage.

Join a support group. You are not alone. You may learn ways to cope that have worked for others.

Do not forget to take care of yourself. Try to take time for yourself to rest or engage in a favorite activity. Please refer to "Self-care: Caring for a Person Living with Dementia" Health Facts for You for more ideas and tips.

Resources

Alzheimer's Association
1-800-272-3900
www.alz.org

Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC)
Find locations here:
https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/index.htm.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 9/2025 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#5265.