

# How to Address Behaviors Of Dementia

- **Understand why behavioral symptoms may occur.**
- **Understand how behavioral symptoms change with the stage of dementia.**
- **Learn how to manage and prevent behavioral symptoms.**

As a caregiver we need to understand that behavioral symptoms are inappropriate behaviors that a person living with dementia exhibits. These behaviors differ from the way the person living with dementia would have acted before the memory loss. Dementia kills brain cells that control behaviors. Unmet needs such as pain, sleep problems, fear, or boredom can also lead to behavioral problems.

Overseeing behavioral symptoms is frustrating for a caregiver. However, there are ways that caregivers can cope with behavioral symptoms. There are not magic drugs for fixing these behaviors. The drugs used for treating behavioral problems often have serious side effects and are very expensive. For these reasons, most experts recommend finding other ways to stop or change the behaviors. This presentation looks at ways to help you manage challenging behaviors.

## BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS

- ***Definition:* Behaviors judged to be inappropriate relative to the needs of the individual or situation**
- **Cause: Dementia destroys the part of the brain that controls behavior.**
- **Drugs used to control behavioral symptoms may worsen dementia.**
- **Use behavioral approaches to manage behavioral symptoms.**

In the earlier stages of dementia, people living with dementia commonly report problems with short term memory. They may repeat questions more than they used to, have difficulty remembering recent chats, and express frustration and complaints related to memory. Personality and behavioral changes become more apparent.

## **MANAGING EARLY STAGES SYMPTOMS**

**To manage behaviors, you might try:**

- **Prevention**
  - **Maintain structure: keeping the household in good condition.**
  - **Simplify the environment: Create an environment that is safe, calm and predictable by:**
    - **De-cluttering**
    - **Making the environment safe**
    - **Maintaining a constant environment**
  - **Provide reminders**
  - **Give positive reinforcement throughout the day**
- **Responding**
  - **Watch for frustration and provide reassurance**
  - **Avoid “testing” memory**
  - **Notify and document if you notice depression or if depression is worsening.**

## **MODERATE-STAGE BEHAVIORS**

As early-stage dementia progresses to a moderate-stage, the person living with dementia may begin to experience more intense or new symptoms, such as feelings of worthlessness or sadness. Persons living with moderate-stage dementia may wander and get lost. Sleep problems also become more common, along with increased restlessness, worry and an inability to calm down. Agitation may sometimes cause the person living with dementia to become verbally or physically violent.

**New behaviors that show up may include:**

- **Wandering**
- **Arguing**
- **Sleep disturbances**
- **Agitation, hitting, biting**

## **MANAGING MODERATE-STAGE BEHAVIORS**

**Address moderate-stage behaviors by:**

- **Prevention**
  - **Break tasks into small steps**
  - **Provide verbal reminders**
- **Responding**
  - **Be reassuring and offer simple answers**
  - **Let go of the little things**

## **LATE- STAGE BEHAVIORS**

People living with later-stage dementia may begin to experience odd behaviors with greater frequency and intensity than in the earlier stages of dementia.

**During the later stages of dementia, the person living with dementia may:**

- **Change eating and sleeping habits**
- **Have difficulty finding the “correct” words**
- **Show difficulty following instructions**
- **Become agitated**
- **Talk constantly**

## **MANAGING LATE-STAGE BEHAVIORS**

**To address late-stage behaviors, consider:**

- **Prevention**
  - **Pay attention to non-verbal signs**
  - **Distract, touch gently or in some cases don't touch at all.**
- **Responding**
  - **Learn what the emotion is**
  - **Refocus and make a connection**

When speaking with a person living with dementia, it is a good idea to use simple words and sentences, and to speak quietly, slowly, distinctly and in a reassuring tone. People with memory loss understand body language. Facial expressions, tone of voice and physical touch all show your feelings of affection. If the person is struggling for an answer, you can suggest possible words, but limit distractions and noise. Getting the attention of the person living with dementia by addressing her/him by name, identifying yourself by name and relationship, and touching are all methods for improving contact. Maintain eye contact at the level of the person living with dementia. A change in ability to communicate may signal a health problem and should prompt you to contact the health care team for advice.

## **USING PROBLEM-SOLVING METHODS**

**In order to be solved, a problem has to be recognized.**

**Start by:**

- **Generating a list of behavioral symptoms**
- **Using trial and error to see what works**
- **Proposing possible solutions**

**MAKE NEW RULES FOR BEHAVIORS: When old rules for addressing behaviors cannot be enforced, use new rules.**

**Examples:**

- **Not taking behaviors personally**
- **Identifying/addressing feeling and emotions**
- **Letting it go**

While it may be difficult, caregivers cannot take challenging behaviors personally. Focus on feelings, not facts. For example, although not correcting or confronting a person living with dementia about a behavior that embarrasses you will not be easy, if you can ignore it, the behavior may subside. Providing a safe space for the person living with dementia to behave as they choose is important, if possible.

## **NEW COMMUNICATION APPROACHES**

- **Speaking slowly, gently**
- **Keeping questions and answers simple**
- **Being patient and supportive and limit distractions**

## **CHOOSING ACTIVITIES**

- Persons living with dementia may experience more boredom and lose interest in activities they once enjoyed. Depression is a common reaction when they become aware of their disease and its effects. Including persons living with dementia in activities to make them feel like an important part of the household can also help provide a sense of accomplishment. They can still enjoy activities, especially if they learned them years ago. Choose simple activities that make them happy such as setting the table for breakfast. Make sure that the person's physical health allows him/her to enjoy the activity.

**A person living with dementia doesn't have to give up all activities that he or she loves.**

- **When monitoring their activities, consider the following:**
  - **Help them focus on enjoyment, not achievement**
  - **Help to encourage involvement in daily life**
  - **Help to encourage them to do favorite activities**
  - **Help them understand their physical limitations**

## **SUMMARY**

- **It is important to determine why behavioral symptoms occur.**
- **Strategies for managing symptoms differ by dementia stage.**
- **Use different strategies to manage and prevent behaviors.**

*This information is intended to help caregivers identify ways to prevent and manage behavioral issues in persons living with dementia. It is part of a series of talks that was developed under a contract from the Health Resources and Services Administration of the Department of Health and Human Services. This work was funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Women's Health.*

Caregiver Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Dementia destroys the part of the brain that controls behavior.  
True or false?
2. Drugs used to control behavioral symptoms may worsen dementia.  
True or false?
3. What are three things that you can simplify the environment in the early stages of dementia?  
-  
-  
-
4. Fill in the blank - As early-stage dementia progresses to a moderate-stage, the person living with dementia may begin to experience more intense or new symptoms, such as?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What are the preventions to address moderate-stage behaviors?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. During the later stages of dementia, the person living with dementia may:
  - A. Change eating and sleeping habits
  - B. Have difficulty finding the "correct" words
  - C. Show difficulty following instructions
  - D. Become agitated
  - E. Talk constantly
  - F. All the above
7. How should a caregiver respond to address late-stage behaviors?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. USING PROBLEM-SOLVING METHODS - In order to be solved, a problem has to be recognized. Start by:  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What are some new communication approaches
  - A. Speaking slowly, gently
  - B. Keeping questions and answers simple
  - C. Being patient and supportiveLimiting distractions
  - D. All the above
10. Fill in the blank  
When speaking with a person living with dementia, it is a good idea to use?  
\_\_\_\_\_