



Helpful Hints for Managing Difficult Behaviors In People with Dementia

The following are suggestions, approaches, and strategies for handling difficult behavior problems in people with dementia. These ideas have been gathered from various sources, including books on caring for dementia individuals (Gwyther, 1985; Mace and Rabins, 1981) and from experienced caregivers of dementia individuals. First, there are general suggestions, which can be applied to many problem behaviors including agitation, anger and aggressiveness, wandering, suspiciousness, and other aberrant behaviors.

SOURCE: *Comforting the Confused*. S. Hoffman and C. Platt (1991). Springer Publishers.



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General Suggestions for Solving Problem Behaviors

1. Have the individual medically evaluated – look for a physical reason for a change or intensification of behavior
2. Keep a diary or log for a few days – this could pinpoint the causes or consequences of the behavior, which could then be modified to change the behavior.
3. Check the personal comfort of the individual – is the person hungry, thirsty, in pain, too hot or too cold, constipated?
4. Simplify the environment – reduce frustration and over stimulation.
5. Anticipate problem situations – plan to avoid or minimize them.
6. Recognize the need for a feeling of being in control – allow choices and involve the individual in decision-making.



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Suggestions for Handling Resistiveness to Care

1. Use a calm, matter-of- fact approach – give simple instructions, step by step.
2. Consider privacy issues in bathing, toileting – provide for the privacy needs of individuals.
3. Offer the individuals some choice. Let the individuals feel they have some control. Let them do what they can for themselves, even if it takes more time. Let them make their own decisions, if possible, about when an activity should be scheduled.
4. Give the person something constructive to do while care is being given.
5. Make the caregiving time special and pleasant, using soft music, scented lotions, and gentle message. Try telling an amusing story or get the individual to talk about a particular interest during care.
6. Be aware of nonverbal communications. The caregiver should avoid appearing angry, tense, or afraid of the individual. The caregiver should take time to relax and get in a good frame of mind before approaching the individual who is difficult to care for.



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Suggestions for Handling Agitation

1. Evaluate the medication regiment- look for possible adverse side effects of medications.
2. Try music- rhythmic music such as classical guitar or harpsichord may be more calming than violin or orchestra music.
3. Find some constructive task for the person to do –folding towels, sorting cards, gardening
4. Reduce stimulation in the environment.
5. Simplify tasks- break tasks down into their simplest steps.
6. Approach the individual in a calm, gentle manner – the caregiver’s calmness will help the individual become calm.



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Suggestions for Handling Anger and Aggressiveness

1. Keep daily routine consistent – avoid surprises.
2. Protect individual from hurting themselves-remove sharp objects and other possible weapons from the environment.
3. Remove the individual from the stressful environment – gently lead the person away, talking in a calm, soothing voice tone.
4. Distract the individual – try a favorite activity or a food treat.
5. Avoid reasoning or asking questions the person may have trouble answering – try a gentle, calming touch.
6. Make sure the individual gets regular exercise-this could relieve tension.
7. Be aware of nonverbal communications- the caregiver should try to appear calm and confident, and avoid appearing angry or impatient. The caregiver should use feeling identification with the individual.
8. If the physically threatening behavior of the individual puts the caregiver in danger of being hurt, leave the scene, get help.



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Suggestions for Handling Wandering

1. Allow the person to wander- make the environment safe and secure.
2. Have the person wear an identification bracelet. Keep a picture of the individual on file. Introduce the individual to neighbors and storeowners in the area.
3. Help these individuals find their way around the environment- clearly label rooms with printed signs or picture.
4. Take the person for a walk, outside if possible.
5. Provide another activity – distract the person from wandering.
6. Reassure wandering individuals about where they are, why they are there, and that their families know where to find them. Use a calm, friendly voice tone.
7. Use monitoring devices if possible to track individuals.



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Suggestions for Sundowning/ Nighttime Restlessness

1. Be sure there is adequate lighting in the evening. Provide nightlights and a well-lit path to the bathroom.
2. Reduce caffeine intake.
3. Reduce environmental activity at the end of day. Reduce the bustle of shift change. Avoid over stimulation programs.
4. Establish a set bedtime routine. Discourage excessive napping during the day, although to avoid fatigue, a short midday nap may be helpful.
5. Provide an opportunity for healthy exercise during the day. A walk, preferable outside, is a good idea.
6. Provide comforting things for the individual – a soft stuffed animal, enjoyable music, a comforting food treat.



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Suggestions for Handling Suspiciousness

1. Do not whisper to someone else in front of the person. Do not discuss the individual as if the person were not present.
2. Help look for a missing item- know the individual's usual hiding places and look there first.
3. Reduce potential hiding places by eliminating clutter and locking unused areas. Keep an extra set of frequently lost items. Check wastebaskets before emptying.
4. Avoid responding defensively to accusations. Avoid arguing or providing a lengthy explanation – be calm and reassuring. Recognize the underlying fear or feeling of loss of control.