



Responding to Behaviors

IDD and Dementia Fact Sheet #8

Dementia affects people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in different ways. Not everyone develops the same symptoms or behaves in the same way. However, everyone with dementia will go through changes in their abilities and behaviors. Sometimes the behaviors cause problems because they're confusing, scary, or annoying. If you're dealing with new behaviors that are creating problems:

- Make sure your family member's doctor knows about the behaviors. There may be caused by other medical problems (like pain, medication side effects, or an infection) that need to be treated. If they are caused by other medical problems, they may get better or go away once they're treated.
- Keep in mind that all behaviors are a way of communicating unmet needs.
- Learn how to manage dementia-related behaviors.

If your family member's behaviors are causing problems, here are some general tips:

- Use simple sentences to communicate. Try not to overwhelm your family member with too much information.
- Try not to get upset. It is the disease, not the person, that's to blame.
- Do not argue with your family member about what's real and what's not.
- If your family member is getting upset—and not in the middle of something that can't wait—shift his or her attention to something else. For example, suggest doing a chore, doing something else that he or she enjoys, or going on a walk.
- Make sure your family member is getting enough rest at night and between activities.
- Be aware of your body language, including the expression on your face and the way you stand. Even if your family member doesn't understand what you say, he or she will respond to your body language and mood.
- Stay calm and smile.

Some behaviors that *may* occur among people living with IDD and dementia include asking the same questions over and over, wandering, yelling, or cursing, getting aggressive, rummaging through things, seeing and hearing things that aren't there, believing things that aren't true, and resisting a bath or shower. This fact sheet will provide tips for dealing with these common behaviors.



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Asking the Same Questions Over and Over

People with dementia may not remember that you've already answered a question. Sometimes they repeat questions when they're trying to ask about something else, need help doing something, or are frustrated or anxious. When that happens, you can:

- Respond to their emotions rather than their questions. Are they scared or anxious? Let them know you understand, care, and will do what you can to help.
- Answer the question again, but you may need to change the way you say it. Keep it simple.
- Distract your family member.
- Try memory aids like calendars, pictures of the answer, answers that you've written out, or voice recordings of the answer.

Wandering

People living with dementia may wander if they're looking for something, trying to get away from something unpleasant, getting confused about where they are and what time it is, and feeling restless.

If your family member wanders, here are some things you can do:

- Provide opportunities for physical activity and time with friends. Your family member may be bored or lonely.
- Provide a safe place to wander.
- Remove fall hazards, like area rugs and extension cords that go across walkways.
- Avoid busy places, like crowded streets, which can be confusing.
- Consider putting two locks on doors to the outside—and one that is above or below eye level.
- Get an identification bracelet for your family member, enroll him/her in Safe Return or buy a GPS tracking device.

Yelling or Cursing

Common causes of yelling, cursing, and other verbal outbursts include pain, medication side effects, loneliness, boredom, and a need for something. See if you can:

- Figure out what the "trigger" (or thing that comes right before the yelling or cursing) is. Consider if your family member may be hungry, in pain, overwhelmed by a task that's



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too hard, or tired. See if there's something in the environment (like too much noise or activity) that's upsetting.

- Change your family member's focus to something he or she enjoys.
- Provide structure by:
 - Sticking to a regular daily routine
 - Giving your family member cues with your words, visuals, and gentle touch.
 - Breaking down big tasks down into smaller steps. For example, instead of saying "Get ready for bed," say "Let's change into your pajamas."
 - Adding pictures or memory aides.
 - Showing your family member what you want him or her to do.
- Keep your words and your body language positive. Smile.
- Play quiet music.

Getting Aggressive

Aggressive behavior can be caused by damage to the portion of the brain that serves as a filter, pain, or discomfort, not understanding what others are doing or saying, and feeling threatened. If your family member is becoming aggressive:

- Stay as calm as you can. Try not to look scared or anxious.
- Avoid shouting or getting physical.
- Reassure your family member that things will be okay.
- Keep eye contact.
- Distract your family member with an activity he or she enjoys.
- Show your family member what you would like him or her to do.

Rummaging through and Hiding Things

People with dementia may rummage or sort through things because they've lost something or are bored. They may hide things because they're scared of losing something important.

If your family member rummages through or hides things, you can:

- Make rummaging an activity by giving your family member a "rummage box" of safe things.
- Help your family member organize things, but do not take them away.
- Redirect your family member to another activity.
- Figure out where your family member's hiding places are.



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- Check wastebaskets for important things before you empty them.

Hallucinations

People with dementia may develop hallucinations and see or hear things that aren't real. Hallucinations can be caused by mental illness, Lewy body dementia, poor vision or hearing, pain, dehydration, medication side effects, infections, and other medical problems.

If your family sees or hears things that do not exist:

- Ask him or her to point to what he or she sees.
- Look for a physical cause. For example, is there an object that's casting a shadow?
- Check vision and hearing.
- Make sure your family member is eating and drinking enough. Poor nutrition and dehydration can cause confusion.
- Ignore the behavior if it is harmless.
- Do not argue with your family member.
- Shift your family member's attention to something else.

Delusions

People with dementia may have delusions and believe things that aren't real. Delusions can be caused by vision or hearing problems, memory loss, and new environments.

If your family member believes things that aren't real:

- Do not try to convince him or her that the belief is wrong.
- Respond to the feeling ("Boy, that's scary") behind the belief, and reassure your family member that things are okay.
- Shift attention to something else.

Resisting a Bath or Shower

People with dementia may resist taking a bath or shower. They may lose track of their last bath or shower, be uncomfortable having other people seeing them undressed, fear seeing water come out of the shower head, dislike being rushed, or be overwhelmed by too many requests. You can make bathing less of a battle if you:

- Stick to a regular routine, and bathe at your family member's favorite time of day.



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- Respect your family member's modesty. If he or she doesn't like being undressed, consider bathing in a swimsuit.
- Use dry shampoo instead of washing their hair during every bath or shower.
- Consider a towel or bed bath.
- Make sure the bathroom is warm.
- Cover mirrors.
- Have your family member face away from running water.
- Play soothing music.
- Remove clutter from the bathroom.
- Wash head and face last.
- Stay calm.

This fact sheet contains information that is general in nature. If you need more specific information about handling dementia-related behavior, talk to your doctor, the Alzheimer's Association, the Area Agency on Aging, or an occupational therapist.

These fact sheets were created by Dementia Friendly North Central/East Texas. For more information, go to: [Dementia Friendly](#)

Resources for people with memory loss and their family caregivers are available at: [Resources](#)

Resources include the following fact sheets on IDD and dementia:

1. *Health and Healthcare*
2. *Dementia Risks, Signs, and Symptoms*
3. *Stages of Dementia*
4. *Planning for the Future*
5. *Getting Help*
6. *Making Home Age- and Dementia Friendly*
7. *Failure-Free Activities*
8. *Responding to Behaviors*

You can get resource information mailed to you by calling 682-433-0375.

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