Practical tips for changes in behaviour



Alzheimer National Helpline
1800 341 341

Dementia can affect a person's behaviour. There can be many reasons for a change in behaviour including changes taking place in the brain, being in pain, change in routine, reduced capacity to communicate their needs or feeling misunderstood and not listened to. You may sometimes find your loved ones behaviour confusing, irritating or even upsetting. It can be difficult to know what to do or how to respond.

Understanding dementia and the impact it can have on a person's behaviour can help. The person may be in pain or discomfort – they may be constipated or thirsty, or in pain from an infection such as a urinary tract infection (UTI) which can cause great distress. Sitting or lying in one position and uncomfortable or tight clothes can lead to pressure sores. Other causes of pain include arthritis, headaches, foot problems, dental pain and osteoporosis. Always discuss concerns about behaviour changes with your GP or consultant, who will be able to check whether there is a physical illness or discomfort present and provide some advice.

Trying to understand the meaning behind the action can also help and think about what may be causing it. Knowing the person and how they react to and deal with things, their preferences, routines and history can help when it comes to supporting them through changes in behaviours.

For example, if you know the person used to work night shifts, it might explain why they want to stay awake or go out at night.

There are things that you and the person with dementia can do to help meet their needs and reduce the risk of changes in behaviour. For example:

- Use short sentences when explaining things to them.
- Answer their questions using their words.
- Speak in a calm clear voice.
- Maintain a structured daily routine and activities.
- Daily walks outside when possible.
- Gentle exercises at home.

Try to remember that the person is not being deliberately difficult; don't take it personally.

Their sense of reality may be very different from yours. They are responding to their own needs.



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Even though a person with dementia may have difficulties with their memory, they still retain emotions. This means they are more likely to respond to the emotional aspects of a situation. It's important to think about how they are feeling, what they are trying to express, and how to support their emotions. It may help to validate the person's feelings for example 'I can see that this is difficult for you'.

Some possible changes in behaviour can be repetitiveness, restlessness, sleep disturbance, pacing, sun downing, accusations, paranoia, and obsessing over one thing such as driving.

The Alzheimer Society of Ireland have a number of resources on activities for people with dementia for all stages including later stage of dementia. For more information or for a copy of the resources call the National Helpline on 1800 341 341 or visit www.alzheimer.ie

Some general tips to deal with changes in behaviours:

- Try to distract them with an activity. Sometimes a pet or a familiar activity can be reassuring
- Encouraging them to do things they enjoy or find useful such as exercising or gardening
- It may be reassuring if the person can hear you sing or have the radio on in the background if you are in another room
- Look at their body language and try to understand what they might be feeling at that time
- Help them to have a daily routine
- Try to figure out what triggers this behaviour. Perhaps keep a diary to help you identify the circumstances in which the behaviour occurs
- Make changes to their environment if necessary. For example, reducing noise, making sure the room isn't too hot or too cold and improving the lighting
- Speak slowly in a calm and reassuring voice
- Keep familiar, comforting or personal items close to them, such as a favourite picture or keepsake
- Try not to show any anxiety as this may increase the person's agitation



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Who to talk to about changes in behaviour?

There can be a number of health care professionals involved in managing symptoms such as changes in behaviour once dementia is diagnosed.

General Practitioner: In many cases, the General Practitioner, GP is a key person in the everyday management of the condition. It is important to keep in contact with the GP and to update them of any changes as they arise.

Dementia Specialist: The GP can refer a person to a Psychiatrist of Later Life, Geriatrician or Neurologist (if under 65) to obtain specialist support during the course of the condition.

Supports in your Community: Help and support may be available through a public health nurse and your local HSE office. Your pharmacist can also be a support and it may be helpful to build a relationship with one particular pharmacist.

Talking to someone can help. Bottling up your feelings, or not taking the time to address them, is likely to make things worse. You can to speak in confidence to our Helpline by **calling 1800 341 341,** email **helpline@alzheimer.ie** or via Live Chat at **www.alzheimer.ie**

Look after yourself

It is important for you to look after yourself as everyone caring for someone with dementia needs support and people with whom they can discuss their problems and feelings rather than bottling them up. You may get the support you need from friends and family, from understanding professionals or from a local support group where you can chat to others who have had similar experiences. If the person continues to behave in ways that are difficult to understand, talk to your GP. Looking after yourself from the beginning is a vital part of living well with dementia. The below tips may help you to look after yourself day to day:

- You are only one person, you cannot do it all. Try to focus on what you can do and accept the things that you can't.
- Try to give yourself positive messages, remind yourself of all the things you are doing well.
- It is okay to focus on one day at a time or an hour at a time if you are finding a particular day very hard.
- Keep up your social contact; keep in touch with family and friends.
- Make a conscious decision to include your needs in your daily and weekly routine.

3

Practical tips for changes in behaviour

- If the person continues to behave in ways that are difficult to understand, talk to your GP.
- It is important to plan for the future and seek advice about legal and financial affairs as early as possible. Further information about managing legal and financial affairs and areas such as setting up an Enduring Power of Attorney is available by calling the Alzheimer National Helpline at **1800 341 341.**
- Don't be afraid to ask for help and support if you need it. Find out whether there are any services available for you or the person with dementia in your local area. Alzheimer's Society's National Helpline can help with this. Also see our 'Get Support' page **www.alzheimer.ie/get-support**
- We offer training to family carers looking after a loved one with dementia. Family carers can either be the primary carers for the person with dementia or those indirectly involved in caring. For more information you can call **1800 341 341** or visit **www.alzheimer.ie**
- Talking to someone can help. Bottling up your feelings, or not taking the time to address them, is likely to make things worse. You can to speak in confidence to our Helpline by calling **1800 341 341,** email **helpline@alzheimer.ie** or via Live Chat at **www.alzheimer.ie**

Talk to your doctor or health care professional

Call 1800 341 341

Visit Live Chat at www.alzheimer.ie

Consider joining a family carer support group

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